

My Friend's Little Sister

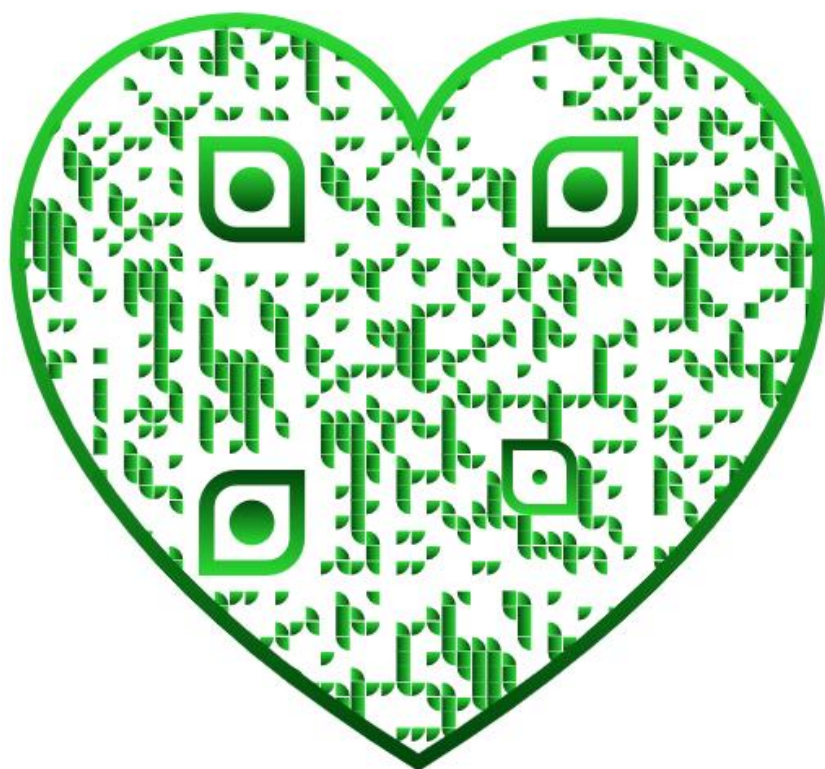
vol. **7**

Has It
IN
for
Me!

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari





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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Characters



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Plays a polite honor student at school, but is annoying to Akiteru. A talented actress. She's outgoing, but still loves anime. It's her dream to land an anime voice acting role.



Kohinata Ozuma

Second year. Nicknamed Ozu. Akiteru's only friend, and the programmer of the 05th Floor Alliance. He loves analyzing anime from a technical perspective.



Otoi [redacted]

Second year. Her given name is private. Low energy. She's a sound engineer who helps out the 05th Floor Alliance. Has a keen interest in anime sound production due to her work.



Tomosaka Sasara

First year. Used to be Iroha's rival, but recently changed to "friend." She doesn't watch anime, but is a little curious about series that trend online.



Ooboshi Akiteru

Second year. The protagonist and the 05th Floor Alliance's producer. Values efficiency above all else. Has no qualms about watching anime at double speed for research purposes.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's cousin and fake girlfriend. Currently working hard to earn his affections. She is secretly the author Makigai Namako. She's watching romantic comedy anime to learn about love.



Kageishi Sumire

A twenty-five-year-old who loves alcohol. She's both Akiteru's homeroom teacher and the talented artist Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. She unwinds daily by watching late night-anime with a beer in hand.



Kageishi Midori

Second year. A phenomenal honor student who gets full marks in every subject, every time. Head of the drama club, but her acting skills suck. She's at that age where stumbling across late-night anime gets her all wound up.



Kiraboshi Kanaria

Makigai Namako's editor, who brings her idol talents to the job. Claims she is seventeen, and chirps at the end of her sentences. Her real name is Hoshino Kana. Many of her series have received anime adaptations.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. My name is Ooboshi Akiteru, and that used to be my heartfelt creed. But then I found myself thinking that there was something cute about Iroha's annoying nature. I wanted to find her a friend, someone who she could be as adorably annoying as she wanted with. That was my goal, but Iroha insisted that she was going to enter the Queen Nevermore contest in full-on straitlaced honor student mode.

If the whole student body were to accept Iroha while she still wore that mask, she could lose the ability to remove it forever. As Iroha's producer—actually, I'm sure *any* producer would feel the same way—that was something I had to avoid at all costs.

There was only one thing for me to do: transform myself into a beautiful girl and win the Queen Nevermore contest myself. I already knew what kind of female characters were popular with boys from my work on *Koyagi*, and I had help from Iroha's rival and the queen of cutting-edge fashion on Pinstagram, Tomosaka Sasara. My transformation was flawless—enough to take on the most beautiful girl in the school, Iroha.

I came armed with more than my disguise. I bribed one of the judges, Otoi-san, with candy, to rig the final round so that it was all about being annoying. It was my attempt to force Iroha into letting her true, cute nature shine. Victory would be mine, whether I actually won the contest or not.

But Iroha used her acting skills to take on my thought processes and came up with a counter-strategy. She forfeited the final round and managed to avoid having to show off her annoying self. She'd also bribed Otoi-san with candy and had the final round of the King Nevermore contest turned into a quickfire math quiz. That secured Ozu's victory. Then, she disguised herself as Ozu and presented herself to me by the campfire, where the winners of King and Queen Nevermore would dance together.

"I told you this wasn't gonna end up the way you wanted. This isn't the kind of cheap cuteness I can show just anybody. I only wanna be this way with you, Senpai."

Iroha left me with those profound words and a mysterious promise that she was going to get even more annoying from here on out.

There was no doubt in my mind that the culture festival had been a huge turning point in the pursuit of the 05th Floor Alliance's goals and a golden opportunity to reexamine my relationships with both Iroha and Mashiro.

I'd let out a sigh of relief having overcome such a huge event, and was just planning my next move when I was hit with the reality that the world was rarely so forgiving. Instead, I found myself facing the highest difficulty level of boss there was—two of them, standing right in my way.

I'll just call them by one title, which applies to both:
They were my friends' mothers.

Prologue

Have you ever heard the phrase “a bed of nails”?

In Japan, the phrase predates the use of tatami mats becoming widespread, and it refers to sitting on mats with needles poking out of them. Essentially, it means an uncomfortable situation, and basically, that was where I was now.

“Aww! How many years has it been since we’ve sat at the same table, Tsukinomori-san?”

“Too long. I’m...overjoyed to see you again.”

In the red corner, we had Kohinata Otoha, a quiet woman with a soft, friendly smile. She had another name: Amachi Otoha.

In the blue corner we had Tsukinomori Mizuki, an innocent-looking woman with a calm face, who spoke in staccato. She was married to my uncle.

I’d just made up the colors, by the way. This was no ring, but a table, where these women were seated to the left and right of me—that is, at opposite sides. Wouldn’t it be sweet if I could rejoice at having two beautiful women sitting with me? But reality wasn’t so kind.

“I-I didn’t realize you knew Mashiro-senpai’s mother, mom. What a coincidence!”

“Yes. Very...convenient.”

Both corners had a second. The red corner had Kohinata Iroha, laughing nervously. An annoying, cheerful type. She was also my friend’s little sister.

The blue corner had Tsukinomori Mashiro. An unsociable girl who was gloomy and cold. She was also my fake girlfriend.

But they were both more subdued than usual, and the two mothers sitting next to them were the obvious cause. It’d be difficult for them *not* to be nervous when made to sit right next to a parent in a situation like this.

Then there was me, under twice as much pressure. That just made things even more awkward.

I couldn’t look either mother directly in the eye; instead I stared at the tomato juice in front of me. There was a glass of tomato juice for everyone here. Even in a situation like this, I didn’t forget my manners. I think I deserve some praise for that, right?

Tomatoes were full of lycopene, something that was supposed to

contribute to reducing stress, but the undue mental pressure I was under right now pierced my lycopen shield with ease.

Amachi Otoha by herself was enough to intimidate me. I could recall the dark pressure coming off her that time I went to eat hot pot with her and Tsukinomori-san. Her gaze had spelled out her doubts about me, and the differences in our value systems as leaders had been palpable. I needed to be ready to square off with her again.

But then, Mashiro's mom was here too. The very wife who had abandoned my uncle—the one he'd been crying over during our dinner together.

A single slip of the tongue here could blow my entire apartment to smithereens, but staying silent wasn't going to do anything about the minefield that was my living room table.

"Wh-What brings you to this apartment building? Isn't this the first time you've been to see Mashiro since she moved here, Mizuki-san?"

I started by broaching an inoffensive topic.

Mizuki-san answered my question while maintaining her smile—one oddly innocent for her composed features. Her Japanese was strangely disjointed, possibly because she had spent so much time abroad.

"I got a long...vacation. For summer. I haven't seen my daughter in a long time. I'm happy to be with her. I came to see her." She shot me a refreshing smile, one that seemed laden with snow crystals. She was beautiful, and I had a sense she might be half-French or something.

"Summer vacation?"

"Oh, is that right, Tsukinomori-san? I'm here for the very same reason!"

"You too, Otoha-san? Um, but it's already September."

"September is when adults have their summer vacations, sweetie! And any proper working adult mustn't question it!"

The darkness in this world stretched further than I had ever imagined.

"But I thought you were a musical star on Broadway, Tsukinomori-san. Does your industry have September summers too?"

"This is when...high-class people go on vacation. Actresses, models, and everyone in the industry. They are all high-class, but they can only go now."

The darkness just got deeper—but it must have been down to her broken Japanese. Yes, that's it. Nothing sketchy to see here. That was how I decided to take it, at least.

A sudden clatter stopped me from continuing the conversation. Iroha had gotten up from her chair and was staring at Mizuki-san.

"I didn't know your mom was an actress, Mashiro-senpai!"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No! A Broadway actress...right in front of me..." Iroha's eyes were alight with curiosity.

Wait. This could get bad.

While Iroha wasn't aiming for Broadway herself, to have any first-rate actress right in front of her was sure to send her excitement skyrocketing. There was just one problem with her getting overexcited right now.

"Iroha?"

"Ah."

A heavy voice spread out over the quiet, accompanied by a frosty gaze. Just that was enough to get Iroha's shoulders to twitch, and for her to plaster an inoffensive smile on her face.

It was no surprise. Her only outlet for acting was going undercover as the Phantom Voice Troupe and providing the voices for *Koyagi: When They Cry*. Her only means of enjoying entertainment like manga, movies, games, and music was to sneak into my room. And all of it was down to her mom's strict principles in raising her children.

"O-Oh. I'm just so impressed, I suppose I got a little too excited. I'm sorry." Iroha gave an awkward laugh.

"It's okay. No need to worry. I like to be praised. I'm very happy."

"Iroha-chan?" Mashiro's eyes narrowed a little as she surveyed her mom's innocent smile and the way Iroha tried to smooth things over.

Right. Mashiro didn't know about the strict rules of the Kohinatas. If this was the first time she was witnessing it, it was no wonder she was surprised.

As things were getting awkward, I forced my stiff mouth into action to move the conversation along. "Oh, uh, so you two plan to be here for a while?"

"That's right, so I thought I would come and let the neighbors know," Otoha-san said.

"In Japan, manners are important. There is *bushido*. It's important to follow, or you lose your head. That's bad. So I came to talk to you."

"We don't actually practice something so dangerous."

This may have been a country built on the decorum of the samurai, but I doubted things were ever that strict, not even back in the day. Though I couldn't deny that having your neck snapped like a cracker was a possibility back then, I didn't want to imagine it.

Wait, hold up a second. Wasn't there something strange about their reasoning behind all this?

"I get what you're saying, but why come to *my* place? I understand you might want to see your nephew after all this time, Mizuki-san, so that makes sense, but Otoha-san—you've always lived

next door, more or less.”

After having hot pot with Tsukinomori-san and Otoha-san, I'd checked with Ozu and Iroha, but they didn't know about their mom's career. I had the sense Ozu had a hunch that his mom was the president of Tenchido, since his innate curious nature meant he did a lot of research on the video game industry of his own volition—and yet for whatever reason he never spoke about it. Just like Iroha, Ozu seemed to have his own concerns about his mother, but honestly I didn't know what those concerns entailed exactly, or how strong they were.

What I'm saying is, although Otoha-san was often absent, she was still able to hide what she was doing from her children. As far as they were concerned, she was just a very busy mother who often had to leave the house. It wasn't like she was working far away from home and staying elsewhere.

So I didn't get why she'd shown up at my house all of a sudden.

“Could it be that you don't want me here?” Otoha-san smiled at me sweetly, and I was done for.

“Not at all. You're welcome any time.” I was straightening my back, bowing, and completely surrendering to her.

My friend's mom sure was terrifying.

After that, Iroha, Mashiro, and I spent a torturous time being crushed by the awkward tension in the air emanating from the two mothers. They spoke and spoke. If we didn't stop them, they'd just keep going. Yet even if we did (try to) stop them, they *still* kept going. Even when I tried to cut them off and bring things to an end, they gently swept me aside and started up another topic.

We were at the very center of hell and its nine circles, never able to escape the magnetic force of the conversation. I could feel myself growing impatient as the numbers showing the time on my phone ticked by one after the other.

“By the way, Ooboshi-kun, how far have you taken things with my daughter?”

“Since when were we talking about that?!”

The second I noticed the conversation come to a standstill, Otoha-san quickly drew me in. She had to pick the most dangerous topic known to man too. I felt like I'd been shot with a silenced gun.

“I want to know too. Very much. Who is your mistress? Mashiro or Iroha-chan?”

“I think you've got your words mixed up. ‘Mistress’ and ‘lover’ aren't the same thing.”

“Oooh, so one of them *is* your lover?” Otoha-san said.

“No, that's not— M-Mizuki-san, can I talk to you for a second?” I

began to whisper into her ear. “You’ve heard about my contract with Tsukinomori-san, right? The one where I’m supposed to be Mashiro’s *fake* boyfriend. I’d appreciate it if you tried to keep the conversation away from that.”

“I do understand. So I asked about your mistress, not a lover. I’m being considerate.”

“Asking about my ‘mistress’ counts as considerate?!”

She shouldn’t have. I mean, she *really* shouldn’t have. Of all the things she shouldn’t have, that was the most shouldn’t-havest of all.

While I writhed from my oncoming headache, Otoha-san let out a quiet, saintly laugh.

“There’s no need to be shy, sweetie!”

“Birds and bees. Youth. Romance. I think it’s wonderful.”

“Please don’t tease me in front of them. This is going to make Iroha and Mashiro feel awkward too.” I turned my gaze to the girls, hoping they’d back me up.

“As a kouhai, I try to be considerate. I wouldn’t mind letting Mashiro-senpai be Ooboshi-senpai’s mistress.” Iroha shot me a stealthy grin.

“Mmgh. As your senpai, I have to decline. You can be his mistress, Iroha-chan.”

“Mistresses are beautiful women who hide in the shadows! I think that would suit you, Mashiro-senpai.”

“They also tease men with completely straight faces. You’d make an S-rank mistress.”

“Oh, my! You’ve done it now,” Iroha shot back.

“Speak for yourself.”

“H-Hey, guys? What’s with the sudden beef— Ow.”

Someone kicked me under the table. Two feet, in fact, hit my shins lightly from either side. Somewhat kicked me—both Iroha and Mashiro.

“What are you talking about, Senpai? We get along great.”

“Yeah, we do. You’re reading too much into it, Aki.”

“Oh, uh. Glad to hear it then.”

What was with that sharp, competitive glint in their eyes then?

They were glaring at each other. On the surface they seemed perfectly fine, but it was like there was some strong emotion hiding underneath, like they were preparing to strike each other with invisible swords. I didn’t realize there was enough rivalry between them to warrant a cat fight. Iroha always saw Mashiro as a senpai and a friend, while Mashiro was very fond of her as her first friend.

That was the impression I had at least, but I guess something must have changed while I wasn’t looking. Maybe it had something to do with the suggestive attitude Iroha had displayed as we danced by the

campfire—but that was as far as I got before my thoughts were interrupted.

Otoha-san narrowed her already slender eyes further, the smile of a wicked witch appearing on her face. “Hm. It looks like I’ll need to do a teensy background check on you, Ooboshi-kun, to look out for my girl.”

“Huh?! Wait, um... What for?”

Mizuki-san gave a hearty thumbs-up, though her expression remained blank. “Daughters, lovers, mistresses. A future husband. You can become a son-in-law for us.”

“I’m not about to give my daughter away to a man with a shady background!” Otoha-san said, getting to her feet along with Mizuki-san.

“I don’t understand! What’s happening right now?!” My voice cracked as I found myself crowded by two mothers.

Yeah, I know my reaction was totally virginesque. Don’t laugh.

These mothers shared Iroha’s and Mashiro’s DNA—up close, their beauty took my breath away. My sense of vision was assaulted by that violent beauty, my sense of smell overtaken by their doubled feminine scent. You’d need to have a PhD in Playboyism to be able to withstand it.

“Mom?! What are you—”

“You’re too close. And you’re being weird.”

While their daughters panicked, both mothers opened their glossy lips and whispered into my ear.

“Ooboshi-kun. Can you tell us something?”

“Oh, er, sure.”

Why was I just going along with this? I needed to pull myself together!

I mentally slapped my cheeks to try and regain my sanity, while Otoha-san’s gaze turned predatory, like a wild animal’s.

“Who are you dating, Ooboshi-kun? What’s your annual income? How about your grades?”

“Huh?”

What was this, a survey for one of those weird aggregator sites? I hated those things. They were way too optimized for search engines, and they used to come up whenever I was searching for something else, hence why I hated them. Thanks to Ozu putting together a system that sorted the most reliable information for me, using search engines was no longer the pain it used to be, so I have no idea what those sorts of sites were like these days.

“Don’t react like that. Just answer the questions, please, sweetie!”

“Okay, um... I don’t have a girlfriend. As for income and grades...I’d say I’m pretty average.”

I gave in to her pressure. I'd never heard anyone using the word "sweetie" with such menace.



After that, the moms persistently bombarded me with questions, and the hellish time continued as I answered them timidly, like an innocent celebrity caught up in some affair or a corruption scandal being questioned by reporters.

On top of that, every answer seemed to send Iroha and Mashiro into a frenzy, both in the positive and negative sense. So then I had to start keeping an eye on their reactions and give answers that sounded like they meant something but didn't, and in an odd way I started to understand why celebrities and politicians used logic to sidestep reporters' questions.

After finally having their fill of answers, the two mothers looked at the clock and declared it was time to head home. While I was grateful they finally remembered their manners, I just wished they'd noticed how late it was about an hour earlier.

"Welp, Senpai. Goodnight," Iroha said with a yawn.

"See you tomorrow."

"I'm so...sleepy..."

Iroha was clearly close to her limit; it was long past her usual bedtime by now. It was weird to see her so groggy, when her default setting was hyper and annoying, like she was permanently plugged into a power source. I guess even extroverts could get drained like this when they'd just been through a culture festival and had to accompany their mother's hours-long conversation.

"See you, Aki. Bye-bye."

"See you. You don't look tired at all, Mashiro."

"I work best at night. It's quiet and dark, so I can focus." Both Mashiro's eyes and tone were perfectly clear.

As a true geek, her habits were nocturnal. Maybe night time was when Mashiro, as an aspiring author, found it easiest to write. The Alliance's scenario writer, and super popular author at UZA Bunko, Makigai Namako-sensei, had also mentioned making more progress at night before. Perhaps being able to focus better at night was a common trait among authors.

"I hope you'll keep on being Iroha's friend. Until next time!"

"S-Sure. Bye."

Otoha-san left a somewhat superficial goodbye as she left my place, with Iroha following after her.

"Oh, that's right— Mizuki-san."

"Me? Not Mashiro?"

Mashiro and her mom were just about to head out the door after the Kohinata combo, when I called out to Mizuki-san.

"I mean you, yes. I, um... A certain someone was telling me they had a little situation going on with you."

“Oh. I understand. Yes, I know. I have it.”

“Mom? Aki? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing important—and nothing for you to worry about.”

Mashiro narrowed her eyes, doubtful, and inclined her head slightly. It didn't matter how much she stared at me, though; this was something I couldn't talk to her about. She was the daughter at the center of this mess. It was best she didn't know.

“Mashiro, I wish for you to go back home. Go in the bath. Can you put on the kettle too?”

“Okay...but if you spread any weird rumors about me, I'll hate you.”

“What! Don't hate me! That's sad!”

“Don't tell him anything weird then. Hmph.” Mashiro whipped her head away from her mom, who was clinging to her.

Mashiro had told me once that she treated me coldly because she loved me. I guess she was just proving that this was how she treated the people she was close to. It was even more obvious as a third-party observer.

“I'm not the type to get off on bad-mouthing you. I hope you can believe that much.”

“If you say so, Aki. I trust you.”

“Oh... You trust your boyfriend more than your mom. It hurts...”

“Because he's proven that he's trustworthy. Hmph!” Mashiro peeled her wailing mom off her and left.

Mizuki-san cried and reached out a hand for her beloved daughter, watching with tears in her eyes as Mashiro got farther and farther away. It was like I was watching a scene from a play. I sighed, feeling equal parts exasperated and impressed.

“I can see why you're an actress. You always could turn on the waterworks just like that.”

“You make me sound like a witch. People will misunderstand.”

“Hopefully I'm the one misunderstanding.”

I couldn't help but be indirect with her. I'd actually heard a lot about her during the time I was out of contact with Mashiro, and there was a very good reason for it.

“Is your mom happy? Healthy?”

“Seems to be. I dunno for sure, though; I haven't seen her in a while.”

This woman was effectively my mom's best friend. More specifically, she was... Well, I don't really need to explain that right now; it isn't relevant.

The point was, Mizuki-san met up with my mom a lot, and in turn my mom would tell me how she was doing over the phone. My mom worked in America, so I hadn't seen her for a long time. I hadn't

phoned her recently either, but she was pretty hardy. She was probably still alive. So we'll just say that no news is good news.

"You don't want to talk to me about your mom. Is that right?"

"Not my mom, no. It's my uncle who came to talk to me. He said you'd left home, and to contact him if I found you."

"Oh. Him."

My uncle—Tsukinomori Makoto. The gentleman of a hundred roles—including but not limited to being Mashiro's dad, Mizuki-san's husband, the CEO of Honeyplace Works (a Japanese entertainment company boasting worldwide acclaim), the man who would get the entire 05th Floor Alliance a job at said company, *and* a scumbag who liked to cheat on his wife.

I had been getting ready for bed after the culture festival when he had called me out to a nearby diner to tell me about his woes.

"Didn't you tell Tsukinomori-san you were coming here? Did you two have a fight or something?"

"The reason, it's a secret. Mysterious. A secret of a beautiful woman."

"That makes it sound like it's so bad you can't talk about it."

I had to admit, the way she held a finger to her lips *did* make her look like the classic enigmatic beauty. I wasn't about to let that charm trip me up, though. If there was one thing I didn't need right now, it was to be saddled with even more inefficient troubles.

"Can I let Tsukinomori-san know that you're staying at Mashiro's place?"

"Don't tell him. It's bad for me."

"I get that, but you've gotta know about the promise I've got with him, right?"

"05th Floor Alliance. A job. I heard that's what you want."

"That's right. So I need to prioritize Tsukinomori-san here. If you tell me why you left him and it's a good enough reason, I'll keep my mouth shut. If you insist on keeping it a secret, I'll have no choice but to tell him."

"Hmm... You are loyal to orders. Akiteru-kun, you are a good slave to a corporation. This is bad for me." Mizuki-san placed a slender, pale finger over her glossy lips, tilting her head slightly as if playing dumb. Then, as if suddenly realizing something, she took out her phone and approached me. Her hand flashed and she grabbed my arm, pulling me to the wall.

"H-Hey!"

Mizuki-san chuckled. "You certainly are passionate, driving me up against the wall like this! What exactly are your intentions?"

Had her Japanese just gotten better?

Wait, that hardly mattered right now. There was something way

more pressing at hand. It was *what* she was saying, not *how* she was saying it.

I wasn't the one responsible for the current situation. Not that you could tell by looking—I had her practically pinned up against the wall with my arm blocking her escape. But I wasn't a celebrity who had to worry about the paparazzi stalking me—I was just some guy, so it wasn't like someone was going to capture this moment on—*click!*—camera and frame me for wait, what was that sound?

"Thanks for the wonderful memory, Akiteru-kun." Mizuki-san chuckled again.

"The...what?"

"This, right here."

Our faces were way too close together as it was, but she somehow managed to get her phone between us to show me the screen. The decisive moment was captured on it. Me, with a grave but impassioned expression on my face, pinning Mizuki-san up against the wall.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! What the heck is this? Delete that right now!"

"I will. If you protect the secret. Don't tell Makoto-san where I am." Mizuki-san ducked out smoothly from under my arm and waved her phone at me provocatively. "If you leak my location I will send this evidence photo of our affair to him."

"Are you being serious? Do you realize what might happen if you spread that photo around?"

"It's okay. If you don't tell him where I am, there won't be big trouble. This is an adult deal. I hope we can be good partners."

"I get what you're saying, I just..."

This was blackmail through and through. You had to be one hell of an aunt to be able to blackmail your own nephew like this, though. Also, wasn't it supposed to be the guy who threatened the married woman in situations like these? I guess it just goes to show that real life works completely differently to fiction.

"Oh. My hand. It slipped. Sent. Too late."

"Aaah! I mean it! Please don't send that to Tsukinomori-san!" I was on my knees and begging.

The moment her thumb would tap that screen, my life and the lives of everyone in the Alliance would be over. No matter what, I couldn't let that happen.

Confident she had me wrapped around her little finger now, Mizuki-san smiled. "Deal is complete. I like loyal people who can keep promises. Goodnight and bonne nuit, Akiteru-kun."

She blew me a kiss and then left my apartment.

She'd played me like a total chump. All I could do was stand in

the entranceway and mumble to myself like a madman.

“Bonne nuit just means goodnight in French. So she said it twice.”
There was no one left to hear my remark.

“You’ve finally got the moms in your clutches too, huh, Aki?”

“Wait. Wait a second, Ozu. That makes it sound like I was the one on the offensive. Didn’t you read it properly? It’s totally the other way round.”

“You’re letting them annoy you instead of approaching them normally. That’s so you, Aki! Ha ha ha!”

“You do realize your own mom’s involved in all of this, right?”

Chapter 1: My Friend's Mom Has It In for Her Daughter

My phone's alarm pulled me out of the deep sleep I'd settled into. It was the morning after the assault from the double moms.

The culture festival was barely even over and I could already sense that there was more trouble ahead. Exhaustion clung to my limbs like muddy ropes, binding my body to the bed. But I was Ooboshi Akiteru. No matter how tired I was, I *always* got up at the right time.

Every morning, I was up at the same time and following the same routine, all to keep my body and mind in order. Waking up properly every morning was key to tuning my day to peak efficiency, and nothing was more important to me than that.

"Senpai! Breakfast is ready!"

"Urgh..."

"You'll have to get up quickly if you don't want your uniform smelling like cooked breakfast."

"Nghuaagh..." That was me responding so that my kouhai knew I'd heard her.

Wait. Hold on a sec. What was with the low-key harassment?

It was a well-known fact that she liked to wake me up in strange and annoying ways, but this was way below the level of annoying I was used to.

There *was* a delicious smell wafting through the air, though. I cracked my eyes open to see that my blurry bedroom door was open. The smell of cooking was coming through the opening.

"You're awake now? Isn't it a little late for you? You must really be tired, Senpai."

"Nah, I'm fine." I yawned, replenishing my oxygen and restarting my fuzzy brain. That was when my mind picked up on the strangeness of the situation. "What are you doing cooking breakfast in my apartment?"

"Hm? I thought you said we were allowed to use your kitchen whenever we liked."

"I guess I did."

As well as my home, I considered this apartment to be a shared office for the 05th Floor Alliance. It was packed with employee benefits for the entire team. I always had a reserve of Murasaki

Shikibu-sensei's favorite alcohol, snacks, and drinks in case anyone wanted to come over, and one room was dedicated entirely to mahjong, with an automatic table and everything.

As long as they didn't encroach on my bedroom too much, I didn't mind everyone using my living rooms and kitchen as much as they liked, even going so far as to say they could cook here if they felt like it.

Very few members actually took me up on the offer, though Iroha had made me rice porridge when I was ill.

"You never usually make anything. What's changed?"

"It's a long story, but I can explain if you want me to."

"Nah. Too inefficient."

"Thought so. It'll be quicker to show you anyway. Just try not to freak out. Aha ha ha..." Iroha's laugh was awkward, and she wasn't looking me in the eye. I already thought she seemed a little low energy compared to her usual self, but now I was sure something was up.

It was as though the breakfast being cooked in my apartment was a surprise to Iroha as well, enough to confuse her—I could more or less *guess* what was happening, but since it was a conclusion totally incompatible with common sense, the rational part of my mind refused to believe it, but nonetheless I got up, still in my pajamas, and allowed the scent of breakfast to lure me down the hall and into my kitchen, where I found Otoha-san.

I'm sorry for stringing my thoughts together into a single long sentence. I just wanted to get it over with, since taking too long would allow the full terror of what was happening right now to seep right to your core.

"Otoha-san... Why are you cooking in my apartment?"

"Oh, Ooboshi-kun!" Otoha-san turned to me, revealing her apron. "Good morning. You look so sweet and defenseless in your little pajamas!"

She must have been making miso soup; she was standing in front of a one-handled pot with a ladle in one hand: the spitting image of a housewife in the morning.

"I hear you eat protein bars for breakfast when you're tired, rather than cooking for yourself."

"Huh? I mean, yeah..."

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Good performance is linked to a good breakfast, so you should always find the time to cook, even if you're busy."

"I do my best to cook breakfast whenever I can. Some mornings just don't work out the way I want, though."

"I understand completely! Days like today, isn't that right? The

culture festival was only yesterday, after all!”

“The culture festival is partly responsible, yes.”

More tiresome had been her midnight visit. But I wasn’t about to say that part out loud.

“That’s why I thought I’d come and give you a teensy hand! I also wanted to do something to thank you for taking such good care of Iroha. She said it was okay to use your kitchen. Oh! And I’ve brought the ingredients from home, so you don’t need to worry about your food stores!”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“I’m sorry, Senpai. I couldn’t stop her.”

“That’s okay...”

From what I knew, her strict upbringing meant Iroha was in a tight spot when it came to her mother. Iroha’s aspirations and work towards becoming an actress were a secret from her parents, so I had to be careful not to say anything dumb. Maybe it was my preconceptions, but I had the sense that Iroha’s expression looked kind of stiff and awkward.

The whole thing was so awkward, it was brewing a death wish inside me.

I could really use an old friend to step in and clear the air right now, but unfortunately Ozu was nowhere to be seen.

“I invited Ozuma too, but he went off to school saying he had other plans. Apparently the student council president needed his help with something before the day started.” Otoha-san let out a sigh. “You poor students certainly have it tough these days.”

That bastard Ozu had thrown me to the wolves.

Before long, breakfast was ready, and Iroha and I helped set the table. There was rice so white it glowed, steaming miso soup, rolled omelets, and grilled fish.

Iroha, Otoha-san, and I sat around the most Japanese of Japanese breakfasts, the three of us a bizarre ensemble. Things had been stiff between the mother and daughter all morning, and despair washed over me as I sat between them, prepared for a heavy atmosphere reminiscent of a cold war.

But there was none of that.

“I haven’t had breakfast with my little Iroha-chan in so long. I’m over the moon! I made the eggs just a teensy bit sweet. Open wide and say ‘aah’!”

“No! Not in front of Senpai!”

“Aww, there’s no need to be prickly. I’ve been so busy with work lately I haven’t been able to come home that often. Do you know how much I’ve missed you?”

“Then leave this sort of thing for inside the house! Don’t treat me

like a kid at Senpai's place! That's no better than exhibitionism!"

"Oh my. Does that mean I can dote on you as much as I like within our own four walls? May I pat your head as you lay it on my lap?"

"Nooo! Stooop!" Iroha wailed.

What the hell was I witnessing? Iroha was flailing her limbs wildly in protest while her mom went for the most basic of coddling techniques. It was an incredibly ordinary scene: the overprotective mother and her rebellious teenage daughter. Not just ordinary—I'd even go so far as to call it happy. Where had the controlling mother and her deprived daughter gone?

"And here I thought you'd stop treating me like this since I'm in high school now." Iroha pouted.

Otoha-san put a hand to her cheek, giggled quietly, and gave one heck of a lousy excuse. "Sorry, honey. It's just been so long that I couldn't help myself."

My honest assessment of the situation was out of my mouth before I could stop it. "You two get along well."

"Did you think we didn't?"

I paused. "No comment."

I probably shouldn't have said anything. Outside of the family itself, I was the only one who knew about the way the Kohinata household was run. What with those overly strict rules in place, I'd always imagined the entire family to be at odds with each other.

My offhanded question's only purpose had been to seek out an explanation for the gap between what I'd expected and what I was seeing. I had no right to complain when Otoha-san came back with something more accusatory.

"We don't...*not* get along." The pause in Iroha's words was pregnant with meaning. "I just don't like it when mom gets overprotective."



“I see. So I take it this is what you two are like at home, Otoha-san? I was just a little taken aback. You were completely different when we met before.”

“I have two different faces for work and home.”

“You met mom before somewhere, Senpai? I’ve been wondering since last night; you spoke like you knew her well.” Having rejected her mom’s unwanted advances, Iroha was now picking up a rolled omelet with her own chopsticks.

“Oh, right. I was with Tsukinomori-san, and—”

“Ooboshi-kun.”

A single utterance was all it took to crush the rest of my sentence to pieces.

Don’t say another word.

Scratch that. It was more like this:

Say whatever you like. But if you say the wrong thing, you die.

That was the message I was getting from Otoha-san’s face, which bore a sweet smile and eyes as narrow as a powerful character in any given manga.

Or maybe I was just being paranoid.

“We’ve bumped into each other putting out the trash and stuff.”

Otoha-san giggled. “I always thank him for being friends with you and Ozuma.”

“Oh.” Iroha didn’t sound convinced, but then she popped the omelet into her mouth. “Hey, this is good!”

I understood why Otoha-san wouldn’t want me saying anything. All forms of entertainment were banned in her house, yet she was the CEO of internationally dominant, cutting-edge games company Tenchido. It was one hell of a contradiction—an unstoppable force versus an immovable object.

A mean-spirited thought suddenly entered my head. An urge to rock the boat, just a little. The wide-screen television in the living room was clearly visible from our position sitting around the dining table. If the relationship between mother and daughter wasn’t as volatile as I’d thought, then surely if Iroha expressed her dream to become an actress honestly, her mom would accept it?

I could see it going either way. Knowing for sure would require some testing.

“Can I put a drama on? I’ve been totally hooked on this one Netflix original series recently.”

Iroha tensed up—but it wasn’t enough for me to stop. I pressed the button on the remote like it was the most natural thing in the world and switched on the TV. I connected it to the internet and accessed the streaming service, before flicking to my history and

playing an episode of the drama series I'd been watching recently.

"My, this is how you access your entertainment, Ooboshi-kun?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have a TV. I've heard that a lot of kids these days do everything on their phones and don't own a TV at all."

"I prefer watching movies, dramas, and anime on a bigger screen."

"Aren't you old-fashioned?" Otoha-san smiled sweetly. She wasn't saying anything out of the ordinary. I had been expecting her to jump in and warn me not to switch the TV on in front of Iroha, but there was none of that. Was it because there was a third party—me—around?

Maybe I should pry a little more...

"You must really like this drama, Ooboshi-kun, if you want to watch it while eating *and* while you have guests over."

I stared at her. Then I gulped.

I may have rushed into this without fully thinking things through. Otoha-san must have figured out that I was trying to dig for information on her relationship with Iroha, and now she had turned it around on me and was digging for clues on *my* relationship with her daughter. She couldn't be allowed to suspect that I was encouraging Iroha to become an actress, but that was right where I'd led her.

How could she not be suspicious? She knew that I managed a mobile games development team, and she'd already realized that Ozu was involved. Iroha's involvement, on the other hand, had been a total secret to the team itself until recently, and no one outside the group knew about it at all.

Otoha-san was Iroha's mom *and* a talented woman who'd made it to the top of her company. There was no way she wouldn't pick up on a change in her daughter, or her environment.

I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean to make you overly conscious."

"No, you were right. I shouldn't be watching shows when I have guests over. Please accept my apologies." I meekly switched off the TV. Pushing things any further would mean leaving ourselves open to having our secret exposed. Otoha-san was a talented adult, capable of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the CEO of Honeyplace Works, Tsukinomori-san, and UZA Bunko's superstar editor, Kiraboshi Kanaria.

She wasn't the type of person I could afford to mess with.

After our strange breakfast with her mom, Iroha and I got changed for school and headed out together, side by side. Usually I'd be wary of Tsukinomori-san's watchful eye and avoid walking with Iroha, but

not this time. Today was very much an exception.

“That breakfast was exhausting...”

“I’m sorry. I never thought mom’d step into our private love nest.”

“We don’t have a love nest.”

“Okay, then she invaded our space that’s full of secrets where we get up to all sorts of naughty stuff!”

“Now you sound like a sneaky journalist trying to damage their target’s reputation as much as possible without technically lying.

Anyway...”

“...We’re not as awkward together as you expected?”

“Yeah, you got it.”

I’d wanted to ask her about that. It was the reason I was willing to run the risk of Tsukinomori-san seeing us walk together.

“Welp, the truth is, I get along okay with mom. We kinda get along *too* well. Take this.”

“Why did you just hit me with your bag for literally no reason?”

“Like you said, for literally no reason. You answered your own question, so why ask? Take this. And this.”

“Your teasing techniques are as unorthodox as ever...”

Iroha was bashing her school bag into my legs in time with my movements as we walked along. If this were a rhythm game, she’d be getting a pretty good score. She wasn’t hitting hard enough for me to call it outright violence, or to really say anything at all, but it was strangely annoying how it was disrupting the ordinary sensation of walking. Also annoying was the way she overanalyzed what I said.

“We get along so well that I guess I’m scared of disappointing her? And I’m pretty sure something happened to her in the past, and that’s the reason she won’t let us engage with entertainment.”

“If you were really that close, you would be smacking *her* with your bag instead of me.”

“Mothers and daughters don’t have that kinda relationship...and I couldn’t, anyway!” Iroha pouted. “I honestly don’t know why I’m so sensitive to what mom thinks.”

“That sounds like a tough one.”

“It sure is.”

“But to be honest, I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell her about your voice acting work just yet.”

“Huh?” Iroha looked up at me, her gaze dubious. “Senpai, you’ve gotta be more than just a neighbor to my mom. How do you know her?”

“I can tell you, but you gotta pretend you never heard anything.”

“The heck? What is this, ‘*My Friend’s Mom Has a Thing for Me: Volume 3*’?” Iroha grimaced and hopped back.

I could practically see the lines of disgust coming off her like she

were in a manga panel.

“As if!”

A physical relationship with a married woman *that* terrifying didn’t bear thinking about. Any guy who fell to the temptation would be sucked dry of all his money and dignity till the day he died, which wouldn’t be far off. In the first place, Iroha shouldn’t know about that genre of adult media, and even if she did, she didn’t have to give it a numbered volume as though she’d already consumed the first two.

“Tsukinomori-san invited me to dinner, and I met her then. That was when I found out that she’s the CEO of a video game company.”

“Mom’s a...CEO?”

“Yeah. And not just for any company. She’s the CEO of Tenchido.”

“WHAAAAAAT?!”

Yup, that was the kind of reaction I’d been hoping for. Though, what with letting out an undignified scream like that... Iroha was at risk of blowing her cover as a perfect honor student. Not that it mattered to me, since I already knew her true self.

“D-Did I hear you right?! Tenchido?! The company that invented that international plumber? Those monsters you keep in your pocket? That guy in the green tunic with the sword who goes to rescue the princess?! The—”

“Stop shouting. You’re letting out way too much. It’s not safe!” I was thinking of Japan’s most powerful clan of ninjas hiding in the shadows—the infamous legal team at Tenchido.

“It’s just so unbelievable, my head’s spinning. My mom is CEO of such a huge company? *Seriously?*”

“I guess it would sound weird out of the blue.”

“You *guess*?! You’re not hallucinating or anything, are you, Senpai?”

Maybe I was. I had an uncle who’d been CEO of Honeyplace Works ever since I could remember, and a Broadway star for an aunt. My parents sort of fit into the same category too. More recently, I’d even become acquainted with a first-rate editor for a publishing house. With all of that in mind, maybe being a couple of degrees of separation away from the CEO of Tenchido wasn’t all that surprising—but if I really thought about it, I couldn’t call it *normal* in any way.

“The rent for our apartments isn’t exactly cheap. You’d have to be pretty wealthy to be able to sustain an entire family there.”

“I always thought my family was average...”

“You don’t know average!” I laughed.

“Speak for yourself, Senpai!” Iroha quickly upped the bag-bashing rate. Frustratingly, I couldn’t deny that the action held a certain degree of cuteness to it, and that was why annoying *and* cute girls were...well, annoying. “So mom’s CEO of a games company, huh? All

while she won't let me touch anything related to entertainment."

"I'm not surprised it seems contradictory to you."

"You mean it's not contradictory to *everyone*?"

"I think there's a chance it *might* make sense."

Entertainment was both fun to consume and to create, so it was often seen as something special, but there were those in society for whom it was just a regular job, the same as any other.

"Not everyone in the industry is passionate about what they do. Lots of them are there just to earn their wage and make a living. People often think the entertainment industry is special, but for a lot of the people who work in it, it's just a job."

"What about your preferences, Senpai?"

"Management who aren't passionate about what they do can get lost in my opinion. It's disrespectful to their talented team."

I knew full well that my view was naive. I knew that other managers would operate under different values to me. I just had no interest in letting them corrupt me.

"Aha ha! Should I take that to mean you're a hundred percent up for fighting my mom?"

"I'm not confrontational enough for that."

I didn't even know for sure if Iroha's mom was one of these dispassionate managers. I'd only caught glimpses of her management style at that one dinner: she liked things to run as efficiently as a well-oiled machine, and she made her decisions based entirely on logic, with disregard for the talents of her creators.

Sorry, but I'm not arrogant enough to think that one night made me an expert on the inner workings of Amachi Otoha.

"I just don't think pointing out that contradiction is going to do you any favors in the long run," I said. "For now, I think you should keep your voice acting secret."

"A secret between just you and me! You got it, Senpai!" Iroha saluted.

"Well, and Otoi-san."

Iroha pouted again, and there was a slight whine to her tone as she continued. "Emotions trump facts in this day and age. See, this is why no one likes you."

"Leave me alone."

"Aha ha ha! Aw, did I make you grumpy?"

Technically, it wasn't just Otoi-san either—Ozu and Tsukinomori-san were also in on the secret, among others. But it'd be a pain to explain *how* they knew (it was simply because they were overly perceptive), so I kept quiet.

"Welp, no matter what happens, I'm sticking by you, Senpai!" Iroha sounded oddly disconnected, like she was talking about

someone else, but that was probably for the best. “Mind if I leave it to you? You can tell me when it’s best to spill the beans to mom and how.”

“Sure. It’s part of our promise, after all. Just keep leaving everything to me.”

Iroha was talented. That made it her job to make full use of that talent, without being distracted by the annoying miscellaneous tasks like decision-making, negotiating with interested parties, and the like. Because I didn’t have the level of outstanding talent all the Alliance’s members had, the one thing I could do was to disconnect them from their troubles.

“Thanks a bunch!” Iroha said. “I’m relying on you, Senpai!”

“I believe you; you don’t have to get physical with me.” Iroha was clinging to me like a needy cat, nuzzling her face against my back. “I mean it. You shouldn’t do that.”

“No one’s watching! Rub, rub, rub!”

“*Someone’s* watching.”

“Eek!”

“Gah! M-Mashiro?!”

The voice came without warning, right by our ears. Iroha and I shrieked and leaped apart. If being caught cheating on your girlfriend was an actual ASMR theme, this was probably exactly what it would sound like. Not that there’d be any demand for it...or maybe there would be? Not from me at least. Nope.

Anyway, I turned around to see Mashiro glowering at us like a cursed doll.

“You made me jump!” Iroha said.

“You made me disappointed. I wanted to walk to school with you guys, but you were already gone.”

“Huh? This is the normal time, though. Sure you didn’t oversleep, Mashiro-senpai?”

“The culture festival has me beat... My MP’s way down. I couldn’t get out of bed...”

I could relate completely. It had nothing to do with hating lively events like that, but when you pluck up the courage to do everything you can to enjoy this year... Yeah, you have fun for sure, but that doesn’t mean you’re any better at dealing with crowds or noise, so it really grates away at your physical and mental stamina, and when bonus time is over and the once endless supply of adrenaline is gone, your life force begins to audibly seep from your pores.

“Anyway, Mashiro-senpai, you never bother going to school with Senpai usually. How come you wanted to go with him today?”

“Why are you asking that, Iroha-chan? You should know.”

“Hmph. So that’s how it is, huh?”

“That’s how what is?”

“Shut up, Senpai.”

“Shut up, Aki.”

“Okay.”

I could swear they were being unreasonably harsh on me. At least they were getting along with each other. That was nice to see.

“You’re not holding back one bit, huh, Iroha-chan?”

“I just got in first. But I know you’re scheming too.”

Mashiro glowered. Iroha grinned.

I said, *at least they were getting along with each other.*

Right?

My eyesight must’ve been getting worse. That was the only explanation for the static I could see sparking between them as they locked eyes, neither saying a word.

“I can smell the casual spritz of perfume coming off you. You’re already cute and highly visually attractive, but now you’re adding an appealing scent as well in an attempt to knock the target off his feet! When is it enough for you?”

“Oh yeah, Mashiro-senpai? It’s obvious that you’ve done something different with your eyelashes. They’re giving off a mysterious vibe—the kind that Senpai likes! Now they’re way too pretty!”

“Now you’re just saying stuff! You’re way cuter than me!”

“No, I’m not! You are!”

“No, you!”

“Nuh-uh!”

Was...it okay to let this go on?

I could tell they were *really* close, though. Warmth flooded my chest as I watched the two of them glare at each other and argue over who was prettier than who.

“What’s that stupid smile for, Aki? You do realize this is all your fault.”

“Oof. You got me with a stray bullet.”

“Are you even *trying* to be a good fake boyfriend for me? ‘Cause you sure aren’t acting like it.”

“That kinda hurts, y’know, and—M-Mashiro?”

“You need to act like it. We gotta do more stuff like this.” Mashiro slid up beside me and slipped her arm into mine.

“Just ‘cause you’re lovers doesn’t mean you gotta go maximum PDA!” Iroha snapped. “It actually makes you guys seem unrealistic! Everyone’s gonna know you’re faking at this rate ‘cause you’re trying too hard!”

“Speak for yourself, Iroha-chan. You were all over Aki a second ago.”

“Yeah, but I’m not dating him, so there’s nothing wrong with it! Kouhais are *s’posed* to lean on their senpais!”

“You’re grasping at straws. *This* is how real couples act.”

“If you wanna talk about realism, Senpai should be getting involved with *me*! They say any man with a decent job will cheat the second he gets into a relationship!”

“Wait, where did you get such prejudiced information from?” I asked. “Some trashy gossip magazine?”

“Sasara told me!”

“She’s telling you a load of crap then.”

Sasara. Full name, Tomosaka Sasara. A first-year honor student whose excellent grades were second only to Iroha’s, and a prodigal Pinstagram influencer with over a million followers. She used to see Iroha as a rival and constant thorn in her side, but at some point while I hadn’t been paying attention, they’d gotten pretty close.

Sasara was an entertaining girl who I reckoned would make a great best friend for Iroha. Next time I saw her, I’d call her Trashy Tomosaka, for taking gossip magazines as gospel.

Getting tugged on from both sides was starting to hurt. That, and I knew that if Tsukinomori-san caught sight of this, I was toast—that man had an aversion to youth. I was supposed to properly play the part of Mashiro’s boyfriend, but seeing us acting too lovey-dovey would undoubtedly remind him of his dark past (my guess was that he’d had some traumatic experience), enough to get his temple veins snapping like a character in a fighting manga.

“Hey, guys? Quit it already. We’re in public.”

“Shuddup, Aki.”

“You don’t get a say, Senpai!”

Yes’m.

I’d heard the theory that Japan was still, in many ways, a male-dominated society, but I sure wasn’t feeling that right now.

Who knew girls could be so strong?

“You agree with me, right, Ozu?”

“...”

“Ozu?”

“Hngh? Oh, sorry. Is the flirting part over?”

“What’s with the headphones, like you’re trying to block out everything from the outside world?”

“Cause all the lovey-dovey stuff is getting on my nerves.”

“Uh, you could’ve phrased that more delicately. I thought you wanted me to get with Iroha or Mashiro?”

“Yeah, I do. But my job here is to be an objective voice. The voice

of, say, a god who's looking down on your life from above. Y'know, like a third party who's not involved with what's going on."

"So you're saying the situation I'm in right now is enough to objectively get on people's nerves?"

"Kinda, yeah."

"Ugh..."

Chapter 2: My Teacher Is Genuinely Apologetic (for Once)!

School classes are way too inefficient.

First, there's the time wasted getting to school. Then, you purposely place yourself in an environment full of noisy classmates who are bound to distract you. Finally, no matter how much you personally understand, you're forced to go through the same lessons and exercises as everyone else.

If only they would recreate the classroom environment via online video—you'd be able to learn efficiently no matter the time, place, or your skill level. For some reason, even in our era of advanced wireless communications, the school system refused to change.

That was how I used to think. I also used to be an idiot.

School was an enclosed environment separated from home. It released children from their families, allowing them precious space to be who they couldn't be at home.

What I'm trying to say is that it felt so *good* to be away from the oppressive eyes of both my neighbors' moms. Freedom. Pure, unadulterated freedom.

My mind hadn't gotten a single break last night, what with Otoha-san and Mizuki-san invading my place. I couldn't even really remember the taste of breakfast that morning. I was grateful for Otoha-san making me breakfast, of course, but I couldn't help but detect some sort of hidden agenda.

I'd been living alone ever since junior high school, and I was used to it. It was only now that I was finally catching up and realizing that school could act as a refuge for teenagers like me. Even Iroha and Mashiro weren't picking stupid fights with me and each other now we were at school.

After all of that, I felt like my focus was at its *peak* in the classroom. Only Ozu and Mashiro spoke to me here. It was nice and quiet. Ha ha ha.

Time to search for *Koyagi* reactions online.

Feeling oddly despondent, I pulled out my phone. School was my escape from home, and now I was escaping that escape by going on social media. Go ahead and laugh. Ha ha ha.

It briefly crossed my mind to make conversation with Mashiro, but when I glanced sideways at her desk, she was tapping away at her

phone with a serious expression. I remembered her telling me that she used a phone to write her stories when she had a spare moment out and about, rather than a laptop. It was the accumulation of these small bouts of effort which would determine whether or not she would successfully follow Makigai Namako-sensei's footsteps and debut with UZA Bunko. I didn't want to get in the way of that, so I decided to leave her alone.

Do your best, Mashiro.

"Huh. Looks like people loved the milestone illustration." I grinned as my gloomy thoughts were swept away.

Koyagi: When They Cry was a mobile game—the 05th Floor Alliance's one and only work. While niche, it maintained a quiet, devoted following. Our consistent hard work had paid off, and it recently broke the milestone of two million downloads. The celebratory artwork—drawn with the blood, sweat, and many, *many* tears of our illustrator, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei—seemed to have touched the hearts of several of our users, who had received it with an outpouring of praise on social media.

The aforementioned tears were due to the tight schedule. I made a mental note to buy her some decent sake as thanks. Hopefully, that would earn her forgiveness.

I couldn't afford to get carried away by all the praise, though. There was always the odd negative comment to remind us that success was not guaranteed.

"You looking up reviews again?"

That was the voice of my best friend: Ozu, or Kohinata Ozuma, one of the few people who ever spoke to me in this classroom. His help with the student council or whatever it was had saved him from this morning's mommy time, and now he was taking his seat with the usual radiant, princely smile on his face. He waved a listless hand and smiled at the girls who screamed their good mornings at him.

"Yeah." Still smiling, I answered his question.

Ozu chuckled. "Looks like good news?"

"Yup. There are a ton of positive comments about Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's latest drawing."

"I bet you're real happy to be our producer right now, huh? Murasaki Shikibu-sensei might've been popular in her niche of shota doujinshi, but she was never gonna break into the mainstream with that. Not to mention she could only sell her stuff at events. It was because of you and *Koyagi* that she's now able to draw stuff suitable for all ages."

"Eh, I'm sure she would've been scouted by someone eventually; I just happened to get in first. What with the way things are these days, she might even have become famous all by herself. But honestly, I'm

proud to have played a part in her success.”

“Funny, ’cause you still seem kinda anxious.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d pick up on that.”

We’d been friends for a long time, after all. Ozu’s eyes saw through everything. I shrugged lightly—while the team’s employment by Honeyplace Works may have seemed like a sure thing, the industry was ever-changing in ways completely outside our control.

“Did you see Honeyplace’s quarterly report?”

“The one that came out in August?”

“Yeah, that one. It was kinda...unnerving.”

“Really? I don’t remember anything too shocking about it. I thought their sales were doing pretty good?”

“They are. That’s the problem.”

Ozu cocked his head at me quizzically.

“Looking at the report, Honeyplace Works makes most of its money off console gaming. That new release, Honey Stage 4, has already sold more than three million copies since launch, both domestically and abroad. I doubt that’s the end of its sales growth too.”

“Tenchido’s been doing incredibly too. Japanese gaming is a massive presence in the market right now.”

“Right—but mobile gaming’s been struggling a little.”

“Their mobile gaming division’s still in the black, though.”

“On the face of it, sure. But when you look at the breakdown, things look a little less optimistic.” I brought up Honeyplace Works’s website on my phone, and then showed Ozu the quarterly report. “All the top contributors to their mobile earnings listed here are games that are years old, and have already established themselves as popular.”

“Yeah. I used a lot of these games’ systems as inspiration when I was putting together *Koyagi*’s. But what’s your point?”

“There are no *new* games.”

“Ah... Yeah, you’re right. A lot of these games which came out this past year have already shut down their services.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

Development and advertising costs were higher than they used to be, and the market was also facing competition from foreign game makers. Creating mobile games within Japan was somewhat of an uphill struggle right now. It was no longer a market you could succeed in without any sort of strategy. Not that it used to be easy, but there was no doubt that success was continuing to get more and more difficult.

“Console games are in, and new mobile games are out. If these trends continue, the Alliance is gonna find itself in a fix.”

“Are you saying Honeyplace Works might start seeing us as a bad investment?”

“Yeah. We’ve only just hit two million downloads, including our free-to-play users. Their paid-for game has sold three million copies like that. Even if they’re a little lenient on us because we’re still high schoolers, that’s a massive difference. If they start cutting their investment in mobile gaming, they might not have the budget for *Koyagi* anymore.”

“If we continue as we are, you mean?”

“Right. We need to grow. At the very least we’ll need three...no, four million downloads, and we’ll need to be able to demonstrate a large core fan base that’s willing to purchase *Koyagi*-related products. That’s my gut feeling, anyway.”

“Goals like that means we’ll need a strategy, right?”

I nodded. I’d come prepared with said strategy.

Closing the tab with Honeyplace Works’s report on it, I switched to a new one.

“Here’s step one.”

“Pinstagram? Uh...‘SARA’?”

I showed him the profile of a certain Pinstagram user with over a million followers. The picture-perfect example of a trendy teenager. There was no other way to describe her flashy profile picture.

It featured photos of overly fashionable café interiors, which barely looked real. Then there were photos (several of them) of fancy desserts piled so high, I’d bet she never even finished them.

It was the most standard of Pinstagram profiles. The stereotypical image conjured up by a dismissive geek like me, who’d never even touched the site and knew absolutely nothing about it. Yet this profile was the accumulation of constant, invisible hard work.

“This profile belongs to a girl called Tomosaka Sasara. Though it doesn’t say here, she’s a first-year at Kouzai. *And* she’s in the advanced class.”

“Tomosaka Sasara... Yeah, I think I’ve heard the name.”

“From Iroha?”

“No, when I was helping the school council president. She’s second in her year, right? I was helping with the databases, and one of those had information on the school’s honor students.”

“Oh, I get you. You’ve been helping that president out a lot this year.”

Ozu had a mysterious main-character vibe, which had led to his encounter with our beautiful school council president. He had a lot of lucky encounters with pretty girls like that, but I was fairly sure the president was the only girl he was still in contact with. If I was right, it meant there was something special about their relationship, but that

was a discussion for another day.

“It seems this girl’s made friends with Iroha. I was hoping we could use that connection somehow and get her to help us out.”

“A Pinstagrammer, huh? Hmm...”

“You don’t look convinced.”

“I mean, I’m sure you’ve put a lot of thought into this, Aki, but most *Koyagi* players are geeks, right? As a social network, Pinsta attracts the complete opposite kind of person, the kind geeks are prejudiced against. Getting a Pinstagrammer involved might just be asking for trouble.”

“I agree with you there. That’s why we gotta do this in the correct order.”

I could foresee what would happen if we forced Sasara to publicize our game based on nothing but the connection we had. I could totally see her admitting that she didn’t even like the game, she was just promoting it for the money, or as a favor. It would be the cringiest collab attempt known to man.

“I can see our users getting mad that we collaborated with this ‘SARA’ Pinstagrammer too. Plus, Tomosaka’s prejudiced against nerd culture. This isn’t gonna be easy.”

“The more you talk, the more impossible it seems.”

“It’ll be impossible *right away* for sure. That’s why we play the long game.”

“The long game?”

“We get her used to this kinda stuff slowly, using Iroha to bring her into contact with nerd culture over and over. We start with the fancy stuff that’s most likely to appeal to normies like her, then gradually get her onto the more hardcore stuff. We’ll have corrupted her before she even realizes what’s happened!” I cackled quietly.

“Jeez, that’s twisted.” Ozu chuckled nonetheless. Speaking of twisted, he was the one donning a devilish grin atop his sweet, princely mask.

“Tomosaka is kinda a wild card, since there’s a lot of uncertainty around whether she’d actually help us out. For the moment, I’m happy just to let her and Iroha get closer naturally.”

Getting overly hopeful about something I had such little control over was never a good idea. It would be nice if Sasara could help us out, but I knew it wasn’t guaranteed. I wasn’t about to let *Koyagi*’s entire growth strategy rest on something so uncertain either.

“Anyway, the most important thing for us to do is to keep improving *Koyagi* with high-quality updates.”

We lived in a world chock full of entertainment. In gaming alone, tens of console games were released by major publishers every month; hundreds or even thousands of mobile games were actively being

managed, and the market was completely saturated with indie titles. Taking a wider view, you had anime, movies, manga, light novels, online videos, livestreams—new entertainment content being released every single day. If people lose interest in your content for just a split second, they could easily be swept up into something else and never come back.

It was a common tale of a harsh battlefield which constantly demanded *more* quality, and *more* content—and we were right in the center of it.

“I’d like us to add more characters, systems, and scenarios to the game, each with a higher quality than before. I’d also like to explore different avenues in spreading awareness of *Koyagi*, and I’m thinking about how we can do that.”

“Nice.” Ozu grinned. “You sure look pumped. Oh, but first, I think there’s something you oughta know.”

“Yeah?”

It wasn’t like Ozu to be this indirect. Usually he just said whatever was on his mind.

“Y’know I was called in by the school council president this morning, right? She had something important to discuss with me.”

“Wait! You mean you finally got a confession?!” I leaned forward expectantly.

How many years had it been now? In junior high school, Ozu had struggled in the classroom environment, and he’d had no idea how to socialize. I taught him all kinds of stuff to help mold my best friend into someone who deserved to be a protagonist. Had all my hard work paid off? Had he finally found himself a real, 3D girlfriend?!

Well, he was always popular. Getting a girlfriend would be a cinch for him, if he just put his mind to it.

“No, nothing like that.” Ozu laughed awkwardly. “Besides, it’s kinda creepy to get so excited over other people’s love lives.”

“You’re one to talk.”

He was always on my case about Iroha and Mashiro. But I guess we could both be a little hypocritical.

“Anyway, she was saying that, in our school, third-years are supposed to retire from the school council in the second semester. They’re gonna have a basic election soon to put together a new council. And that girl, the one who’s always asking me for help?”

“She’s retiring too?”

“Yep. Apparently, her money’s on Midori-san taking her spot as president.”

“That’d make sense.”

Midori-san—Kageishi Midori. She was head of the drama club, and we’d helped her out before. She was also in the advanced class for

second-year students. She was the most honorable of all honor students who had never lost a single point on any test for any subject, ever since she'd joined the school.

Her grades were phenomenal. She was queen of the jungle that was our school. A walking library, whose head was packed full of information on everything from science and math to physiology. An omniscient and—well, you get the picture. The point was, she was a girl genius, the kind that was a stock character in almost every single manga.

At our recent culture festival, dubbed the Nevermore Festival, she had headed the Executive Committee, and hosted the Queen Nevermore contest together with Otoi-san. Their interactions (i.e. Otoi-san's bullying of Midori, but who cares about the details?) stole the students' hearts. It was her occasional airheadedness that kept her likable, and so loved and trusted by her schoolmates. She was perfect for the next school council president.

"She asked me something else too."

"To keep helping out the school council, even after she's gone?" I cut in.

Ozu nodded. "I told her I'd think about it. I wanted to get your advice before I decided anything."

"My advice? Oh. You're worried about *Koyagi*, right?"

"Yeah. More time helping the student council means less time to work on *Koyagi*."

It didn't sound as though he felt he couldn't manage it. And I was sure Ozu already knew exactly how I was going to answer. He was just following a process here—this was probably his way of being open with me. That was why I was going to give him the exact answer he was expecting. No ifs, no buts.

"Go for it. What better way to spend your youth than helping out the student council?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Don't worry, though; I'll try and arrange stuff so that I can still work on *Koyagi* just as much as before." Ozu smiled.

"Sure. I'm counting on you!" I replied, cheerful.

If he was going to start helping out the student council in an official capacity, it was easy to see his workload increasing. Frankly, less Ozu was going to be a major loss to *Koyagi*. If we had Ozu's skills to rely on full-time, we might even be able to use our proceeds from the game to outsource the work, and start developing a new high-quality title that could stand up against the console market if we wanted to.

But there was no point in that. To follow that path would be inefficient, considering what our original goal was. If getting more involved with his surroundings and taking part in school culture

meant Ozu had an opportunity to improve his communication skills, it was one he should take.

Ozu let out a strained laugh, as though he knew just what I was thinking. “Oh, Aki. You’re too nice to me. ‘Specially when you’ve rejected everything to do with youth yourself.”

“Actually, I’ve been doing some self-reflection about that lately.”

“Oh? Glad to hear it.”

“And I don’t think I’m especially nice to you either, compared to everyone else.”

“Really? ‘Cause I’ve seen how you treat Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.”

“You sure? You realize I do everything to keep her happy *and* productive. Including studying up on pressure points and using the budget to let her keep a stock of expensive alcohol at my place.”

“What about being nice when it comes to deadlines?”

“That’s an exception.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t be any more lenient with her when it came to those.

Suddenly, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I was surprised to see a LIME message from Sumire-sensei herself, of all people. Speak of the devil.

“i need to talk to you about something. can you meet me in the usual place at lunchtime?”

The shadows of steel execution devices were just barely visible in the room’s gloom. The counseling office was the only place in school where such ancient, fantastical devices were permitted to be. Though September was already here, the air outside was still thick with summer heat, filling this cramped room with the damp scents of iron and leather.

An iron maiden and something that looked like a brazen bull.

You might be wondering whether those objects and the others around them were legal, but they were actually all replicas. That just about stopped any issues from arising. On the surface, they appeared to be props stored on behalf of the art or drama clubs, but in reality they were references for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s art. Speaking of barely legal, this was where she took advantage of her job to bolster her private life.

The king—sorry, *queen*—of this sinful place was waiting for me, like any queen would, on a throne. Her hair was a gorgeous shade of violet. Her body’s tight lines were as perfect as though sculpted by the Greeks themselves and accentuated by the close-fitting suit she wore. She had her long legs—wrapped in black pantyhose—elegantly crossed as she sat on that throne (-like prop) you might use for a

cosplay shoot.

She was our homeroom teacher, Venomous Queen Kageishi Sumire, and on her face was a confident (and somewhat obscene) smile.

When everything about her was put together, she was one intimidating queen. It was rare to see her in this mode outside of the classroom or away from the attention of several people.

“Funny. You don’t usually call me out here unless you’re looking to ‘discuss’ a deadline.”

“I *do* want to discuss a deadline, in a way.”

“What? But I haven’t given you any work to do.”

She’d only just finished the two-million-downloads piece, and she was right between jobs at the moment.

Something was off about the way she was acting too.

“What’s with you anyway? Why aren’t you dropping your mask already? You’re creeping me out.”

“I have no intention of embarrassing myself in front of you today.”

“Hm?”

“Today, Ooboshi-kun, I speak with you as an adult, firm in her resolve.” Sumire’s sharp gaze seemed to pierce right through me, like a skilled assassin who had found her target. When she spoke again, her voice was clear as could be. “I want you to stop assigning me illustrations for a while.”

“No can do.”

“You’re not even gonna ask ‘why’?!”

“Well, yeah. Because it’s not happening.”

“Tyranny! That’s what this is! You’re a tyrant. A dictator!”

“Hmm... Yeah, maybe I am being a little dictatorial. Sorry.”

“See?!”

“‘Murasaki Shikibu-sensei says she wants me to stop assigning her illustrations for a while.’ And send...”

OZ: No way that’s happening.

Makigai Namako: Don’t show her any mercy!

“There, now we’ve got a democratic decision.”

“Democracy’s supposed to be nonviolent!” Sumire wailed.

Did she want to be treated fairly or not?

Her seconds-old determination had been torn up like scrap paper, and she was now clinging to me desperately, getting the mucus from her nose and eyes all over the sleeves of my uniform.

I sighed. “Tell me your reason, then,” I said as I pushed her face away from me.

“You’ll hear me out?” At once the despair on her face was expelled by hope.

“There is a slim chance that I might feel willing to try to consider making a concession for you depending on what the issue is.”

“That is way too many implied maybes! You really wanna work me to the bone, huh?!”

“I was just messing with you. Tell me what’s up.” I jerked my chin at her to encourage her to elaborate.

“R-Right...” Sumire nodded. “Well...you know class trip season is coming up.”

“Class trip season?”

“Why do you sound so confused? You’re a second-year; it’s got everything to do with you too!”

“O-Oh. Oh, yeah.”

I’d totally forgotten. Kouzai’s second-year class trip was planned for October. There was no questionnaire asking whether we’d prefer Okinawa, Kyoto, or Guam—at our school, the teachers decided our destination. This school was somewhat prestigious, with the majority of its students going on to study at college level, so those destinations tended to be somewhere educational—somewhere with a lot of history or tradition, for example.

Boy, was this school messed up. Only pulling out the “prestigious” card when it felt like it and being no better than a kindergarten the rest of the time.

Anyway.

Without a proper announcement during homeroom, the only place I would hear about the class trip was in conversation with my friends. Friends I didn’t have. Ozu and Mashiro were like me—unsociable—so the class trip wasn’t exactly a topic they’d bring up either. And so, I’d been in complete ignorance of the whole thing up till now.

But it wasn’t like I cared, okay? I *knew* I didn’t have any presence in the classroom. I’d long accepted that as fact.

“Sorry, I know you’re having a moment of sorrow right now, but can I keep going?”

“...Yeah.”

I didn’t have the energy to correct her.

“Well, they put me in charge of the class trip.”

“Huh. What does that mean exactly?”

“It means putting together the schedule, booking the inn and the bus, planning a surprise event together with the Class Trip Committee—that kinda thing.”

“Really? Which other teachers have they put in charge?”

“None. This is a one-woman operation.”

“What the hell? Are you kidding me right now?” I couldn’t hide

my exasperation. Any other teacher would have found my outburst rude.

“There’s this one hotel that the school’s used year after year. We have a kinda business relationship with them, I guess? We’ve stuck with that hotel because it’s what we’ve always done, but the area, the food, and the activities there all suck, and the students always come back saying they hated it,” Sumire said. “The hotel’s fine for businessmen on meeting trips, but for kids who are there to make fond memories of their youth? I was dumb enough to run my mouth at the faculty meeting and ask whether we couldn’t do anything better for them.” Sumire let out a dry laugh, scratching at her cheek, seeming awkward. “The vice principal was all like, ‘Yes, you’re right. Go and organize something better,’ and then I got stuck with it. I shoulda kept my mouth shut.”

“I guess the other teachers didn’t wanna get stuck with the work, so they never bothered to do anything about it up till now. Still, I’m a little surprised, y’know.”

“Hm? About what?”

“That you were so assertive when it came to the class trip. You hated the thought of getting involved with a sports club before, and you’ve always tried to avoid anything that could eat into your drawing time.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s *your* influence.”

“How? I’ve never trained you to go against your values.”

“It was when we were at my family’s place over the summer vacation.”

That was a while ago now. The whole of the Alliance (Makigai Namako-sensei excluded) set off for a trip to the beach. Sumire had been driving, and instead of a beach, she’d driven us deep into the mountains to this deserted village, like she wanted to LARP Call of Cthulhu. As I recalled, we’d made a lot of progress on her family issues, leaving only a few odds and ends to tie up later.

Sumire had fled her family in order to follow the path she wanted, although she would still be teaching for a little while yet. Although, the head of her family, her grandfather, seemed to have seen through everything, and secretly supported her move.

“I guess I feel lighter, because I know I can quit being a teacher whenever I want. I feel more motivated now. I asked myself what’s best for the students, and figured that I wanted the class trip to be as fun as possible.”

“Wow. You almost sound like a real teacher.”

“I *am* a real teacher! And a super beautiful one at that. Hmph!” A smug smile on her face, Sumire stuck out her long leg as if to emphasize her point. If only she hadn’t added that last part, I might

have agreed with her. “I’m a long-term nerd who loves the Comiket atmosphere, so I know what it is to wanna enjoy an event like that. I saw all the criticism left on the questionnaires by students who’d gone on the trip before, and I couldn’t bear to let things go on like that.”

“I get what you’re saying—though my first time at Comiket was that time I went to meet you. Everyone there seemed really hyped and there was a sense of unity. It only lasts a couple of days, but that’s part of what makes it so special, right?”

“You got it! I know I kinda got roped into this, but I really do wanna pitch in and help out the students if I can. But I’ve still got my regular lessons to run, and I’m doing this class trip work alone, so—”

“You won’t have time to work on your illustrations?”

Sumire gave an unambiguous nod. She looked up at me from beneath her eyelashes. “Is that okay? I’m not being too selfish, am I?”

I hesitated. “No, it’s fine. You can have your time off.”

For a moment I thought of refusing her. I really did need that pause before my response to make sure I was making the right choice. But I just couldn’t bring myself to dash her hopes here. Allowing her to work on the class trip was important for her happiness. She should do what made her happy. As a producer, it was my job not only to ensure my team had the time to do their jobs, but also to find ways to fill in for them when that wasn’t possible.

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. Just make sure we have a good class trip, Sensei.” I smiled at her, doing my best to conceal my inner panic. That was my job.

All that remained was the matter of adding more content to *Koyagi* to help push its downloads up to three million. Only now we had to do it without an artist.

“Wait, you’re letting her *off*? Are you sure you’re feeling okay, Aki?”

“You don’t think much of me, huh?”



05th Floor Alliance (4)



...



AKI

So Murasaki Shikibu-sensei won't be doing any illustrations for us for a while.



AKI

Sorry to break the news in the middle of lunch.



Makigai Namako

Are you serious?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i'm sorry! i'll make it up to you guys somehow!



OZ

Unacceptable.



OZ

But, well, if AKI's agreed to it, it's not my place to say anything.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

stop it you're gonna kill me!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

stop leaving all the decision-making to aki like you're totally reliant on him! stop with the juicy inspiration!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

it's too precious! i'm seriously dead!



AKI

Shikibu.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

yes, sir, sorry, sir, i got carried away.

OZ

OZ

Won't that be a bit rough? We won't be able to add any card art for a while.

AKI

AKI

Yeah, it will.

AKI

AKI

I'll try to come up with something.

OZ

OZ

Is anyone here secretly a super-good artist but has never actually told us?

OZ

OZ

Not me fwiw.



Makigai Namako

I've...never drawn before, but I could make an attempt?

AKI

AKI

Don't worry about it, Makigai-sensei. We know you're busy.



Makigai Namako

An attempt was made.



Makigai Namako



AKI

AKI

Don't worry about it, Makigai-sensei. We know you're busy.

OZ

OZ

Did you seriously just copy and paste your super indirect refusal? lol.



Makigai Namako

Shut up. I know it's bad.

AKI

AKI

This is what happens when I try to draw.

AKI

AKI



OZ

OZ

Oh, hey, you can tell who it is.

OZ

OZ

Don't think we can use it, though. It's not even close to being professional.



Makigai Namako

You really are totally average at everything, huh, AKI?



AKI

I guess we really can't get anyone in the team to fill in for Shikibu.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

waaaah! i'm sorry!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

causing all this trouble is making my stomach hurt!



Makigai Namako

Don't sweat it.



Makigai Namako

You look really cool when you're taking your job seriously.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

namako-senseiiiiiiiiiii!



AKI

I'll have another think about what to do.



AKI

I'll post my plan here once I've decided on something.

Chapter 3: My Friend's Little Sister, Her Friend, and I Are Going to Karaoke!

It was the day I'd agreed to give Murasaki Shikibu-sensei a break from drawing, and school was over. At lunchtime, I'd broken the news to the Alliance over LIME, and after some discussion, I spent the afternoon classes using about ninety percent of my brain (brainpower I should have been using to study) trying to come up with a solution. To no avail.

I was still humming and hawing to myself as I walked home. Mashiro wasn't with me; she'd rushed out of the classroom as though she had business to attend to. Ozu wasn't with me either; as part of his role helping out the student council president, he'd been asked to assist the Class Trip Committee with something.

I'd really wanted to start increasing our pace in adding content to *Koyagi* to get those three million downloads, but right now things weren't going to plan. Not that I had any intention of whining about it, of course. I was the producer, so it was my responsibility to come up with something and get us through this.

I was deep in thought when it happened.

"Got yer pressure point!"

"Guhah!" A sudden, calculated thrust at my defenseless back had me flopping in the air like a fish. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"You were giving off this unhealthy vibe, so I thought I'd show you the technique I learned by watching you! How was it? Did it feel good? Are you all healthy now?"

"No and no! If I were anyone else, you'd get arrested for that!"

"C'mon, Senpai, you should know I'd never try to bother anyone else like that! Have a little common sense, will ya?" The final two words came with a wink.

The perpetrator of that ultimate combo was one of the most annoying girls who— Okay, I said "annoying." That must've already tipped you off: it was Kohinata Iroha.

"You shouldn't tease me in public. Tsukinomori-san might see."

"Don't care."

"Wh— Hey. You know how important my agreement with him is for the Alliance."

“I sure do. But I also seem to remember you telling me to be more annoying in general.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that.”

“I’d been holding back ’cause you said you couldn’t be seen hanging around with any girl besides Mashiro-senpai. But then you were like, ‘be more annoying,’ so now I’ve got no choice but to be a full-on pest, wherever we are!”

I studied her. “Are you still mad about the culture festival?”

“Who knows?”

I wanted more people to know how cute Iroha was when she was being a pain. I wanted her to be accepted for who she was, even if that was just by one other person. So I put together a plan for the culture festival. I fixed the final round of the Queen Nevermore to get her to show the entire crowd her annoying side. But Iroha outwitted me, and my plan failed. She then promised to be even more annoying going forward—but only to me.

“If Tsukinomori-san starts seriously doubting you, I’ll play along with any excuse you have! But all that convincing is gonna be your job—and your job alone! No one’s gonna see anything out here anyway, so I’m not gonna be nice and hold back anymore!”

“You’re not wrong...”

While I secretly thought she could stand to shut up a little, I was pleased to see that Iroha was putting her own desires first. The real problem would come if I were to seriously get involved with another girl, but this was different. Iroha’s behavior might be misinterpreted if my uncle were to see it, but then all I needed to do was clear up the misunderstanding.

“Now that that’s cleared up, you can tell your big sister what’s bothering you! Hit me!”

“Hey, you’re my kouhai, remember? But yeah, I guess I’ll tell you.”

Despite her shenanigans, I told her everything. The trends from Honeyplace Works’ quarterly report. My desire to reach at least three million downloads to make sure we didn’t fall behind, and how that meant possibly broadening our horizons. And then suddenly Murasaki Shikibu-sensei started getting busier with her main job.

Iroha listened to me with uncharacteristic seriousness. She must have realized how important this was by my tone.

“Lost your artist, huh? Hmmm...”

“Wait, I just thought of something!”

“Yeah?”

“What if you acted as Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and copied her talent?” I started laughing. “Just kidding!”

“Hey, I never even thought of that! Lemme try it!”

“Wait, what?” I hadn’t expected her to take the suggestion so seriously.

Iroha took a deep breath and stepped into her role. Her eyes flew open. She pulled out a notepad and pen from her bag, then started to sketch like she was possessed.

“Wait...are you actually doing it? Is it working, Iroha?”

“Guooorgh! Behold! My new super cute character!” Her hands were a blur as she drew line after line, transforming a rough silhouette into a sharp drawing in a matter of seconds.

I felt like I was watching a speedpaint video, only it was happening in real time in front of me: no editing and no corrections. The pressure was immense. It was the very same pressure I’d experienced watching Murasaki Shikibu-sensei working on her third all-nighter in a row. And then...

“I’m done!” With an almighty yell, Iroha thrust the notepad right in my face, presenting me with the impromptu illustration she’d drawn from the very soul of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei herself.

I started by imagining one of Shikibu’s genuine outstanding works—would *this* live up to *that*? My heart was hammering, my body was burning, and my breathing was ragged from the anticipation. I looked properly then. I looked at the illustration she’d drawn clearly, right there in the notebook.

“Huh. It’s pretty bad.”

“*Right?!?*”

Iroha agreed wholeheartedly with my snap assessment. She must have realized it wasn’t that great as she was drawing.

“You can copy a personality perfectly, but I guess that doesn’t extend to skills.”

“Ugh. Art really does take practice, huh?” Iroha groaned, dejected.

I thought back to when Iroha had used her acting skills to transform herself into a complete delinquent to deal with Mashiro’s bullies. That felt like a long time ago now. She got the intensity of the personality right, but she would have been in real trouble if it came to an actual physical fight.

Iroha could turn herself into Sumire like that, but there was no way she could recreate years of drawing practice.

“Sorry, Senpai. I didn’t help much, huh?”

“Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t really expecting you to.”

“Ouch! I tried real hard, y’know!”

“Yeah, and I’m grateful for that. Think about it, though. You’d be in a bad spot if I got my hopes up too high, right?”

“Right!”

...Maybe I did get my hopes up just a little bit. I won't tell if you won't.

"Seriously, though, I'm screwed. I can't come up with a single solution."

"It's been a while since you've genuinely struggled with something like this. Hmm..." Iroha studied my face, thoughtful. "Wait, I got it! I, the girl who descended into the darkness, am about to strike you with a dazzling realization!"

"We play mahjong for fun, not to gamble, so get out of that darkness. Also, tell me your idea." I wasn't interested in playing along with her theatrics, but if she had a solution, I definitely wanted to hear it.

Iroha's eyes flashed like lightning, and a grin appeared on her face as she announced, "We're gonna have *fun*!"

"You know, I really oughta figure something out for the Shikibu situation."

"Hey! Wait! Don't just ignore me and walk off. I'm actually being serious, you know!"

"Serious, my ass. Time is of the essence here, and I can't waste any of it playing around."

"But even if you devote all your time to this, Sumire-chan-sensei still isn't gonna be doing any work, right? So it's not like you're gonna make any progress!"

"Hngh. That's true..."

"Nothing's gonna happen till you come up with an idea. And sitting at your desk twiddling your thumbs is literally the last place you're gonna find one!"

I was catching on now. I needed some sort of stimulation!

"You need an escape from reality! You gotta wait for a strike of inspiration! You gotta believe in the you that exists five hours in the future! That sorta thing."

"You sure have a way with words..."

She could rephrase it to be as flashy and pretentious as she liked, but I still wasn't completely sold.

"You always work way too hard, Senpai. I bet the cogs in your brain are all jammed up and rusty with how hard you're working them. You're not gonna be finding any good ideas in there!"

"Ugh. That kinda makes sense too."

"Cute people never lie! And since I'm cute, I'm as honest as can be!"

"Look into logical fallacies. I think you might learn something. But I agree that doing something totally unrelated to work might help get my creative juices flowing."

I could definitely see myself sitting down at a desk and getting

nowhere. Iroha was annoying, but sometimes she could make a good point.

“So? Let’s go play, baby!”

Don’t call me baby.

“Shouldn’t you be getting home? I thought your mom was visiting.”

“She is! Which is why I don’t wanna go home!”

“You told me you got along with her!”

“This has nothing to do with that. I just wanna be free to spend my time *away* from family sometimes, y’know?”

“I guess I can understand that.”

“Besides, when mom’s at home, I can’t go over to your place to flirt.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, our cliché protagonist! There’s no charming him for this leading heroine when he insists on dropping dense lines like that!”

“Talking like that doesn’t make my life a dating sim, you know!”

She was the one who had lowered her voice in the first place—quietly enough that it’d be written in small font in any light novel. Obviously I hadn’t heard her.

Maybe if this *were* a light novel, that would’ve been her whispering a confession or something. That would’ve been so out of left field in the current discussion, that I decided it wasn’t important. And if she *had* just confessed to me, that’d just make her a weirdo who didn’t know what timing was.

Iroha couldn’t be a weirdo, right?

I would like to think not.

“Anyway,” I said after a pause, “I’ll come do something with you. On one condition.”

“Oh? You’re taking me somewhere sleazy? How d’you keep all that libido hidden, Senpai?”

“I want somewhere private. Somewhere no one else is gonna disturb us. A locked room, if you will.”

“You’re taking me somewhere sleazy?!”

They were the exact same words with a different cadence, changing the meaning completely. Wasn’t language interesting?

Iroha was backing away from me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes locked on me like I was some kind of criminal. Honestly, it hurt a little. I shouldn’t need to say that I didn’t even have a sliver of an ulterior motive.

“It’s to protect my status as Mashiro’s fake boyfriend. It’ll be hard to come up with excuses if someone sees the two of us out after school.”

If Mashiro hadn't said she was busy, we could've invited her and we'd be good.

"Oh, so that's what the 'locked room' is all about. All right! I know!"

"I knew you'd have somewhere, Iroha! You're like a walking encyclopedia of all the best hangout spots."

"Duh! I'm only the prettiest, most popular, and most sociable girl in my class!" She giggled.

If I were with Mashiro right now, we'd be in a fix.

"Where, then?"

"Karaoke! Where else?"

"Oh... The place where all the outgoing types hang out, right?"

"Actually, I've heard it's pretty popular with the geeks in the generation above us. You oughta see all the ten-year-old anime songs they've got dominating the rankings."

"Even the non-geeks of that generation know the famous anime theme songs and how to sing them."

Theirs was the generation of celebrities uploading covers of anime themes onto video sites. Music transcended borders too. You got songs from famous overseas artists becoming wildly popular over here, even though no one knew what the lyrics meant, let alone how to read them. Music was one of the few things that could bring geeks and non-geeks together.

"All right, then. Let's go to karaoke!"

"Yahoo! Lucky you! You get to hear my amazing singing technique!" Iroha laughed.

"Hm. I'll judge how amazing it is for myself."

If she was really good, maybe we could put together a theme song for *Koyagi* and she could be the singer.

I was kidding, of course. There was a lot of complicated stuff that could make hiring Iroha to sing a theme song difficult, so I wouldn't get your hopes up. A man could dream, though, right?

I'll get this out of the way first: Iroha *was* a good singer.

Her volume control, pitch, and sense of rhythm were all great, and she was capable of holding a pleasant vibrato. As part of her acting study, she often visited Otoi-san's studio to do some voice training on top of the usual recordings we did there. As a result, she was in perfect control of her vocal cords, and her skills flew way above average no matter how you sliced it.

At the same time, because she *was* so naturally talented at acting already, her singing technique felt somehow incomplete by comparison.

Ugh. I'm doing it again.

I had a bad habit of seeing everything in relation to a person's creative talents. Why should it matter if Iroha's singing wasn't at the level where I wanted to share it with the world? This was karaoke. The only goal here should've been to have fun. Getting to sit next to the school's most popular pretty girl as she sang her heart out with a huge smile on her face was even more than I deserved.

Well, technically, given the results of the Queen Nevermore contest, I guess *I* was the school's most popular pretty girl. I wasn't in the mood to nitpick, though.

"Yeah! Yeah! Wooo! Yay!"

Iroha belted out the final notes of the high-energy song before striking a pose that matched any rock musician's. I could almost hear the crowds chanting her name from that pose alone, but I was probably getting ahead of myself.

Iroha turned and grinned at me. "Hear that? Didn't I give an awesome performance?"

"Yeah. Totally awesome."

"At least sound like you mean it!"

"You're a good singer; I've just never heard the song before." I was trying to get into it, but I was struggling. "Anyway, what's with all the mainstream stuff? Not gonna sing any anime songs?"

"Oh. Force of habit. These are the songs we sing when I go to karaoke with the girls in my class."

"Right. If you're going with who I think you are, that makes perfect sense," I said, thinking back to the girls I'd seen Iroha hang with for the summer and culture festivals. I doubted they ever listened to any anime music at all. "Must be tough having to listen to and sing songs you don't even like."

"Eh, it doesn't bother me too much."

"No?"

"Nope! At the start, I listened to those songs just to fit in with them, but the more I listened and sang, the more I started to like them myself."

"The meme exposure effect, huh?"

"Isn't music great? It's an excellent tool for brainwashing."

"Don't call it that. Though I guess making you listen to something over and over *is* a tool they use in brainwashing..."

Iroha's experience had given me an idea, however. She was outgoing enough to fit in with the normies, but also geeky enough to fit in with the Alliance. If she were able to pick any song she wanted, I had no doubt she'd go for anime songs—but listening to mainstream stuff over and over had gotten her to like it. If we applied that same principle in reverse...

“What do you wanna sing next, Senpai? I can put it in for you!”

“Don’t get so close.” The imposing presence of a girl sliding right up next to me was getting in the way of my thinking. The room was so small that we were close enough to knock knees. It was the kind of distance that made it hard to occupy the space with a member of the opposite sex.

“What? Why not? It’s not like Tsukinomori-san’s here, right? We can be as lovey-dovey as we want!”

“I’m not worried about him right now. It’s about...respecting each other’s feelings.”

“Oh? I don’t think we have to worry about that anymore.”

“What do you mean? It’s not like anything’s changed between—”

“Things *have* changed. For me, at least.”

“Come again?”

“How about this? *Onedari Darling!* It’s *super* moe! I wanna hear your inner moe girl, Senpai!”

“Shut up. A guy singing that would just be cringe.”

“Did you win Queen Nevermore or not?”

My victory as Queen Nevermore was anything but relevant right now. I never did anything to make my voice more feminine for the contest either. There was something that bothered me about what Iroha said too, but the moment to ask about it had passed. It’s a normal thing, right? Like you want to ask someone something, but the conversation moves to a different topic, and in the end you miss your chance.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I have your tomato parfait.” A staff member appeared at the door and set down a sundae glass on the table, its contents bright red.

“Oh! That’s mine. Yay! It looks so *good!*” Iroha’s voice was a full octave higher. The moment the staff member left, Iroha pulled out her phone and started taking snaps of her parfait.

“You sure like to order some strange-flavored parfaits. Is it good?”

“It’s a specialty at this karaoke place! Everyone says the combo of the tomato’s acidity and the ice cream’s sweetness is a match made in heaven.”

“Huh. It sounds like a weird combination. I’m surprised it’s so popular.”

“To be honest, I think it’s more popular for how it looks. It’s all about the aesthetics.”

“Aesthetics?”

“Right! I mainly ordered this ’cause I wanted to upload a picture to Pinsta,” Iroha said, tapping away at her phone.

I glanced at the screen while feeling slightly guilty about it, and

caught a glimpse of the many photos she'd uploaded to her account. There were the views from Kageishi Village, the starfish we'd seen at the beach over summer, as well as some shots from the recent summer and culture festivals. The collection of photos sparked a variety of memories in my head.

"I didn't know you were on Pinsta."

"I only just started. Sasara wouldn't stop bugging me about it."

"Hm? But you've only been friends for like a day."

"She sent me *ten* LIME messages yesterday telling me to make an account."

"She really is a stalker..."

I started worrying whether Sasara might not be such a good friend for Iroha after all.

But wait—if Iroha was on Pinsta now, couldn't we make use of her account? We wouldn't have to rely on Sasara, as long as Iroha got herself a million—well, maybe not *that* many—but a good number of followers and influence. We could then use her account for the benefit of *Koyagi*.

I decided to test the waters a little.

"Is Pinsta fun, then?"

"Hmm... I dunno if I can say, seeing as I've only just started."

"Do you think you'll get a lot of followers?"

"It's not that easy, Senpai. Wait a sec... Are you really that interested in my Pinsta account?" Iroha grinned. "I see! You're *super* curious about how I interact with social media! You're terrified I'm gonna get closer to some guy you've never even met. You're like one of those guys who stalk their crushes online and react to any post they make in two seconds. Aww, Senpai, you're totally the jealous type! It's so obvious!"

"Not even close. And what's this about guys reacting to posts in two seconds? I doubt even stalkers with way too much spare time on their hands are glued to their crushes' profiles every minute of every day."

"No, I've heard that's actually a thing."

"Seriously? Jeez. Be careful you don't attract any weirdos like that, okay?"

"I will. I don't think you need to worry, though. I'm probably just gonna upload whenever I feel like it. I'm not gonna take it as seriously as Sasara does."

"I see."

I was hoping she *would* take it that seriously, and that she'd get popular. Not under her real name, of course. If she didn't want to, though, then it wasn't like forcing the issue was going to motivate her. Iroha's calling was to become an actor. Anything outside of that was

down to her whether she wanted to do it or not.

Though if Iroha wasn't up for it, I was back to square one: thinking of a way to get Sasara to join us. That'd be tough, seeing as she was totally against anything related to geek culture. I frowned thoughtfully.

There was a buzz as a phone vibrated—not mine, but Iroha's.

"Oh, it's Sasara. Jeez, she really is a stalker."

"What'd she say?"

"See for yourself."

"Hey, I saw your Pinsta! They serve those tomato parfaits in Parsley, right? By the station? I'm actually super close by, so I'm coming over!"

"She's a stalker through and through."

"Yup."

The two-man jury was out and had unanimously declared Tomosaka Sasara guilty.

Incidentally, "Parsley" was a nickname for the karaoke place Iroha and I were in right now. It was a famous chain, with the majority of its stores in urban areas. It had spacious party rooms, and was popular for after- and closing parties of all kinds.

It was known for its relatively decent food too and had a menu that offered many Pinstagrammable dishes—such as the tomato parfait—which made it popular with students as well. It was on the expensive side, though, so unless you had a part-time job, some kind of income, or a generous allowance, it was only really affordable on special occasions.

"I'll reply to her. 'Leave me alone.'"

"Are you sure you guys are friends?"

"Yeah. It's a chill friendship, 'cause I can treat her like trash."

I laughed. "Just make sure you're not *too* mean to her."

I was glad Iroha had finally found a friend she was at leisure to annoy, but everything had its limit. There were times you had to remember your manners, even among friends. And there were times you had to dial down the peskiness too. I was all for Iroha being herself around me, but depending on the time, place, occasion, my mood, et cetera, sometimes I could really lose my temper with her.

"There's no being too mean when this is a hundred percent her fault! What kinda loon gate-crashes their friend enjoying karaoke with *other* people?"

"Isn't that pretty common among normies?"

"Actually, even normies get creeped out by that kinda behavior. But yeah, I didn't tell her what room we're in, so she can't actually come and bother us."

“You sure? Can’t she use GPS tracking to figure it out?”

“No way! I know we said she was a stalker, but there’s no way she’s *that* creepy! Listen, if she actually shows up, you gotta see the glare I’m gonna give her.”

“Hey, Iroha! I’m here!”

“Ugh...”

As promised, Iroha was glaring daggers at her.

I couldn’t believe she actually showed up. But there she was, a triumphant smile on her face: Iroha’s stalker, Tomosaka Sasara. My friend’s little sister’s friend— Well, that was a bit of a mouthful. Let’s just call her a (sort of) interesting girl.

“I told you to leave me alone. What are you doing here?”

“Wait, are you doing the whole ‘tsundere’ thing? That’s what it’s called, right?”

There it was: the normie “talent” of half-heartedly adopting geeky terms into their speech. As if she had the faintest idea of the deep meaning and far-reaching history behind the term. Although it originally referred to a girl who hated the protagonist and was outright mean to him, but then things’d progress and she’d gradually treat him more fondly, nowadays it had also come to refer to a character who was sweet on the inside, but cold and prickly on the outside, so...

Right, no one cares.

“C’mon, don’t be so cold. I was literally close by, so I thought it’d be nice to come see you.” Sasara let out a hearty laugh, not put out at all by Iroha’s less-than-welcoming reaction.

“You really gotta start thinking before you act. How’d you know which room we were in anyway? N-Not GPS, right?! Only someone crazy in love with me’d track me like that!”

“I didn’t *track* you! Your room number was on the receipt in the photo of the parfait you uploaded. See? Right here.”

“Crap, you’re right! I shoulda checked for that kinda thing.” Iroha grimaced at her own blunder displayed clearly on Sasara’s phone screen.

“You really gotta stop treating me like a stalker. I literally did nothing wrong.”

“Are you kidding? Only someone who knows to look for information like that would find it. The fact that you did only makes you more suspicious.” I couldn’t hold back.

Working out someone’s location from the tiniest scrap of information in a photo and then heading right there was seriously sketchy. Worse was that Sasara didn’t seem to acknowledge that.

“Look, I just wanted to hang out with Iroha! I’m not a stalk—Ooboshi-senpai?!” Sasara froze, her pose awkward.

“That’s me. Thanks for your help at the culture festival.” I lifted a casual hand.

Once again I was aware of how I seemed to blend into the background. I’d been sitting beside her beloved Iroha this whole time, and she hadn’t even glanced in my direction till I spoke. If life were a film, it’d be revealed in the very last scene that I was dead and a ghost this whole time.

Unfortunately, I was very much alive, and my life was nowhere spectacular enough to warrant such quality composition. At most, it’d be a comedy, but realistically, the fact was just that I lacked presence.

“Eh. Ah. Uh. Has Ooboshi-senpai been with you this whole time, Iroha?”

“Yup. Which is why I told you to leave me alone.”

“Ugh! R-Right...” Overwhelmed by the sharpness of Iroha’s gaze, Sasara stumbled backward.

I didn’t really follow the logic in their conversation. There was probably something in there that only the two of them understood.

Wait a minute. From the context, it was obvious that they were talking about *me*. Could it be that Iroha didn’t want Sasara here, because she was with me? I see... She was worried that having a normie singing karaoke with us would make me feel awkward. Iroha could deal with it, thanks to her superb acting skills, but she must have realized that I was in no way capable of the same.

Really, though, she had nothing to worry about. As far as I was concerned, this was a perfect *opportunity*. A chance to get closer to Sasara, and win her over for the Alliance!

“I-I get it! I’m sorry for disturbing you guys.” Sasara turned to the door to make an awkward exit. “I’ll just go—”

“No, it’s fine. Come sing with us.”

“What?!”

“S-Senpai?”

Both girls gawked at me.

“You don’t have to worry about me. I might not know much about mainstream music, but I’m used to sharing a space with normies. I do it all the time at school. The trick is to blend into the shadows.”

“That’s just *sad*! Don’t say it like you’re proud of it! I wasn’t really worried about you either...” Iroha made a face like she was turning her next words over in her mind, unsure whether to say them or not. She eventually decided not, and thrust one of the unused microphones towards Sasara like her life depended on it. “Okay! Fine! You sing, Sasara!”

“W-Wait, are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I *am* gonna hold a three-day grudge against you, though!”

“You’re not okay with it, then! You should see how much you’re pouting right now.”

“I told you I’m sure. As long as you don’t mind me putting a curse on you that means you won’t be able to find a boyfriend for an entire year! Hmph!”

“Nooo! I actually believe in that kinda spiritual stuff, y’know?! I seriously *won’t* be able to find a boyfriend if you curse me!” Sasara wailed.

One was mad and the other sad, but even as they clashed, I was relieved to see that nothing signaled that they were seriously falling out with each other. I even started getting a little emotional. What I was seeing in front of me was exactly what I’d wanted for Iroha.

I *didn’t* understand what had gotten Iroha so mad in the first place—but I decided not to dwell on it.

One hour later...

“Yeah! That was crazy *deep*! Super awesome! I’m getting so hyped!” Sasara was getting into the music as much as Iroha, clapping along with her friend’s singing with explosive enthusiasm.

There was no more awkwardness here—no more sense that Sasara was intruding. The volatile negative emotions that were common among normies had transformed into positive energy in a split second.

Sasara had a genuine grin on her face as she shook the tambourine in her hand along to the beat.

Normies sure were terrifying. And there was one *very* terrifying thing that stood out to me in particular.

“Tomosaka’s kinda impressive, you know? How can she get so hyped up over a song she’s never heard before?”

“Even I’m not sure. And I’m a genius!”

Iroha and I whispered to each other as we watched Sasara singing and banging on her tambourine. The girl had been at max excitement level this whole time, even over songs she was hearing for the first time.

I had let Iroha in on my plan—quietly—just a short while earlier: to sing anime songs with a cool, stylish flair to them. Songs she thought might appeal even to an anti-nerd.

As a normie with a kind heart, Sasara was really flexible when it came to accepting others. She still had a weird prejudice against nerds and didn’t have anything positive to say about *Koyagi*, but if we could get her to like anime songs that *sounded* just like regular J-pop, maybe she’d come to accept anime and other aspects of nerd culture before

she knew it.

That was what I hoped.

After sharing my plan with Iroha, we'd been working together this past hour to pick songs that pushed the boundaries of what Sasara wouldn't *hate*, at the very least.

"Man, this is so fun! You sure know a lot of awesome songs, Iroha. What was that one just now?"

"The theme from *Downtime Slayer*. You know that one, right?"

"Oh, yeah! I do! There was a movie out recently, right? *Infinity Drain*? Something like that?"

"Yup! That's it! It's super popular!"

"Some of my followers told me to go see it. The protagonist ensnares his workaholic little sister so she can't work anymore, then goes to get revenge on the corrupt company that took his family away! Then he goes to work for the labor standards board so that his sister can regain her humanity. I've heard it's really good, what with its intense yet simple story line."

"How come you know the plot that well but you've never been to see it?"

"I guess 'cause it's an anime film? I know it's popular, and I'm kinda curious, but I haven't had the *chance* to see it."

If any series could change public perception, it was *Downtime Slayer* and its thirty billion yen in box office revenue. It was a hit among everyone, young and old, male and female, nerd and cool. I couldn't help but respect that.

"If you're interested, I could lend you the manga?"

"You've got the manga, Iroha?"

"They belong to Senpai, actually—he's got every volume."

"Yeah, I do."

And I bought them precisely because *Iroha* had said she wanted to read them. Whenever a popular anime came out, Iroha liked to read the source material and think about how she'd play its characters compared to how the professional voice actors played them in the adaptation.

When she had begged me for the manga, I bought it for her because it was for her edification. Although, when she took over my bed and started reading manga there, it looked like her "studying" was just an excuse, and she was actually just reading for fun.

If it helped with her acting in the end, though, I was happy to let her read it however she wanted.

"Wait, *all* of them? That's so gross. In a good way!"

"Claiming it's 'in a good way' isn't gonna make me forgive you for calling me gross. That hurts, you know?"

"C'mon, quit being so sensitive."

"You're gross, Tomosaka. For being a stalker. In a good way."

"Hey! You can't just insult me outta nowhere! I won't let that slide even if you say it's 'in a good way'!"

"Now think back to what you said about half a second ago." Only three lines earlier, she'd accused me of being sensitive. She must have had the memory of a goldfish. It wasn't like hypocrisy was a new thing with her, so whatever. "I'm happy to lend them to you if you want?"

"I totally do! Yeah!"

"Huh, I'm surprised you're being so upfront. I thought you wouldn't wanna touch some 'nerd's' manga with a ten-foot pole."

"But you're different, Ooboshi-senpai. I guess I wouldn't mind if it's *your* manga."

"Oh? I must've made a lot of progress. I remember when we first met and you were unreasonably mean to me."

"What I don't like about nerds is their laziness and lack of hygiene, which they somehow manage to convince themselves isn't a problem. So they do nothing to fix it, yet they have the gall to be prejudiced against girls like me! I know *you're* not like that, Ooboshi-kun. You take care of your personal hygiene, and you're sincere, like how you kept up with the skincare routine I taught you."

It was nice of her to praise me—honestly, it was—but what right did she have to complain about other people's prejudices?

I guess it could be put down to a chicken and egg thing. In the prejudiced fight between nerds and normie girls, neither side's ideas came about first. They just developed naturally and slowly over time. I bet somewhere in there was the basis for why humans would never stop going to war with each other too.

Anyway, we'd now successfully put Sasara on the path to becoming a nerd, what with exposing her to anime songs that could put a smile on the face of any normie, *and* we had a promise with her that allowed us to proselytize her using a manga that had already made its way into the mainstream.

It was getting so late it would be hard to call this just an "evening" anymore. Sasara suddenly gasped.

"Uh-oh! I gotta go, or I won't make my curfew, and mom's gonna kill me..."

"You've got a curfew, huh?"

"Sure do! Most of us do, right?"

"Yeah, but you strike me more as the type who paints the town red past midnight on the regular."

"Hey, I'm not a *delinquent*! Remember, you're talking to the number one honor student in my year!"

"Hold it! *I'm* number one."

“Tch. I was just emphasizing my point! Besides, aren’t you always saying you don’t care about the class rankings?”

“I *don’t*, but I reserve the right to correct your lies. There’s nothing more annoying than someone getting smug over something that’s not even true!”

“Gngh. Enjoy it while it lasts, ’cause when the next test period comes around, I’m taking your spot!”

“Wow, I’m spooked. Hey, maybe that baseball team you like so much’ll have some luck this year too.”

“Darn it, Iroha! They’ve already lost so much they *can’t* win!”

“What the heck are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“Professional baseball. Sasara’s team’s famous for being terrible, year after year.”

Sasara sniffed. “Their victory gets *stolen* from them. If it weren’t for that weird vulture team or whatever, they could win easy!”

“No, they couldn’t—they lose ’cause they’ve got no synergy. I’d think maybe they were keeping some tricks up their sleeves if they weren’t wearing tank tops—metaphorically, I mean. But even then, any team that *you* back is *bound* to lose!”

“Y’know, Iroha,” I said, “you might want to watch how you talk with someone you only *just* made friends with...”

Hadn’t her mother taught her to avoid the main three controversial topics? Religion, politics, and professional baseball?

At least she hadn’t mentioned any teams by name, but my heart was still pounding, worried that she might slip up.

“What about your curfew? Should you really be hanging around like this?”

“Whoops! Right. How much is the bill?” Sasara rummaged through her bag for her purse.

I watched her thoughtfully for a moment.

“Don’t worry; I’ve got it.”

“Wait, what? I don’t really like people treating me.”

“It’s not like that. This is a business expense.”

“A business expense?” She blinked at me, confused.

I wasn’t surprised by her reaction, but that didn’t change the fact that this outing affected the future of the 05th Floor Alliance—to the extent I was happy to use the budget to cover the cost.

“Aww, Senpai, you’ve got a heart of gold! Not that I wanna cut you open to see!”

“Why’re you poking me aggressively in the chest then? That hurts!”

“You’re not gonna question this, Iroha? You said ‘business expense,’ right? You don’t own a company or anything, do you?”

Despite Sasara’s bewilderment, I didn’t want to fill her in on all

the details just yet. It was too soon to tell her I led the Alliance, or that I was the producer for *Koyagi*. I could still see her rejecting me outright at this point. It had to be a slow process, one I wouldn't start until her allergic reaction to nerds had gotten better, and we'd dragged her down deeper into the swamp.

People like her couldn't remember what they hated three months ago, and that same dislike could easily become a like before they'd realized it.

"I'll explain another time. I *do* run a business, but it's not something I can discuss very openly."

"Talk about suspicious! Wait, am I gonna be okay? Am I okay to hang out with you guys? Or am I gonna end up all over the papers for spending time with the wrong kind of people?!"

"You're fine. I don't do anything shady."

"I sure hope I can trust you. Well, at least gimme a hint. Like, if this business of yours had a color, what would it be?"

"Black."

"And you're telling me it's not shady?!"

It was a horror game. What else was I supposed to say? It was her fault for asking such a specific leading question.

Sasara tried to insist on paying for herself, but in the end I managed to convince her by using her ever-approaching curfew as a bargaining chip. I think I was able to convince her that my business wasn't anything to be suspicious of either, but I don't know what she thought it was I *did* do instead.

Speaking of, thanks to Sumire's brainless way of introducing me to her sister, Midori *still* thought I was a Hollywood director. Keeping my identity a secret from Sasara and doing what I could to keep it that way might well lead to unexpected trouble later. But I guess I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

After parting ways with a panicking Sasara, Iroha and I wandered home under the darkened sky.

"Yo, ho, ha."

"The heck are you doing?"

"Dodging the ground that's lit up by the streetlamps. I'll lose a life if I step on them."

"Forgive me, but I thought you graduated elementary school?" I sighed, though I was a little amused as I watched Iroha with her arms spread out, hopping from one patch of ground to the next.

She spun back to face me and smirked. "So, are you satisfied now that I'm being my 'impure' self to someone who isn't you? That's what you wanted, right?"

"Only you can answer that. I'll only be satisfied when you are, so

if you're not, I gotta come up with my next plan."

"Jeez, there's no weaseling outta this one, huh? Don't you think you're being kinda unfair?"

"Sure, it'd be against the rules if this were a quiz or something."

At the end of the day, all I wanted was for my Alliance mates to be as happy as possible. Right now, I wasn't gaining any self-satisfaction from it at all. That would come only when Iroha herself was satisfied.

"To be honest, it is kinda fun having a friend like her. I would've told you if it wasn't."

"True. You guys seem really close considering how new your friendship is. Is that how quickly normal people can get close to each other? Because that's terrifying. Like there's some mental teleportation involved or something."

"Zoom!"

"Forgive me, but I thought you graduated elementary school?"

A funny sound effect and movement quicker than the eye could perceive, which led into a direct attack. It was one of the top five moves you'd see on the playground as a kid.

"Tomosaka looks like a fun friend to have. I never imagined she'd care about her curfew—or even pro baseball."

"She said it's 'cause her dad's into it. He supports the same team as her."

"Huh. I guess they're pretty close, then."

To me, she seemed like the kinda girl who'd insult her dad (saying something along the lines of "stinky," and "creepy"), and tell him to stay away from her.

I was starting to come to terms with the fact that my assumptions about Sasara were just a bit too harsh. I needed to have another look at them.

"Yeah, and she apparently gets along with her mom too. She *claims* she hates her brother's guts, but they did go to the festival together—even if that was just so he could pretend to be her boyfriend. There's no way they'd do that if they really hated each other."

I chuckled. "That's true. Chatarou-kun looks like he's at that rebellious age, but he seemed like a good kid to me. They seem like a really happy family all in all."

"Must be nice..." Iroha murmured, absentminded.

I nearly stopped in my tracks. I knew exactly the meaning hidden behind those words.

The Kohinata household. That apartment on the fifth floor. Its inhabitants were Iroha, Ozu, and Otoha-san. Nobody else.

Not once had I heard any of them mention a father of any kind,

and Otoha-san's relationship with her children was weird, to put it politely. It took a rare personality—one like Ozu's—to not let a situation like that affect you. *Of course* Iroha yearned for a tight-knit happy family.

Neither of us said anything. We just kept walking through the awkwardness. It wasn't long before I couldn't take it anymore.

"Yaaah!"

"Eek!"

I broke that silence recklessly, rudely, and rashly.

"Wh-What the heck are you doing? You can't just touch a girl's hair without asking!"

"I know that. But I couldn't think of anything to say after a whole three minutes, so I had to do *something*."

I knew my thought process was like that of a small dog. But no... Maybe a mom, a dad, or a brother would have done the same thing—rustling Iroha's hair into a mess because she looked sad.

"I oughta report you for sexual harassment...but since it's you, I won't. You could actually get sentenced for that, y'know."

"I'm glad you didn't hate it that much."

"You're the only one I get to punish without getting the police involved. Get ready, 'cause I'm definitely gonna get you back!"

"You thinking you're above the law is scary enough as it is."

"I mean it, though—I'm fine, but you shouldn't touch other girls so casually. I know you get those manga or whatever, where the protagonist pats the girl's head and then suddenly she's all over him, but in real life, you're just gonna mess up her hair and she'll hate you instead. There's a tip for you, Senpai, seeing as you're a virgin."

"I already knew that, actually."

"*Sure* you did."

"I mean it. I learned it from Tomosaka's Pinsta when I was studying up on fashion."

"Oh. That actually makes sense."

"Yup. Don't underestimate Queen Nevermore."

"That title is way too powerful."

The number of Queen Nevermores out there was pretty low. Especially *male* Queen Nevermores. Too bad it probably wouldn't do anything for me on my resume. Wait, unless... Eh, I didn't actually care enough to think about it.

"All you're gonna do now is go home, eat, take a bath, and go to bed, so it doesn't matter if your hair gets messed up."

"Uh, don't you think *I'm* the one who gets to decide if it matters or not?"

"Good point. *Does* it matter?"

"Sí!" Iroha paused before pouting at me. "Well, no, it doesn't. But

it was mean of you to point it out when you *knew* it didn't matter. You can't just go around cheering people up when they need it. And I mean that in a good way."

"Adding 'in a good way' to everything doesn't suddenly make your point valid. I can't even tell if you're grateful to me or not."

"And I'm not gonna tell you! You're the one who's gonna be in trouble if I properly explained anything, so just let yourself be befuddled by my baffling words!"

"What?"

"You got it!" Iroha shook her head to break free from my hand on it and hopped away from me. She reminded me of a lonely cat that jumped out of your arms the moment you gave it the attention it was hoping for.

She could run away from me if she wanted to. She looked a little brighter, and clearly felt able to crack a few jokes; that was enough for me.

As long as Iroha was satisfied from the bottom of her heart, then selfishly, I was satisfied too.

"How the heck are you two not dating yet when she lets you get away with this crap?"

"Huh? No, I just did what a brother would do."

"Welp, I guess I should be grateful that you wanna show her some brotherly love, seeing as I can't."

"I think you could, actually."

"Aha ha ha! I guess that's something we should talk about later..."

Interlude: What Mashiro Saw

“Snow White looked down at the remains of the Death Anemone as they dyed the emerald seafloor red, fragments of pain flickering in her eyes.’ And, enter!” I slammed my finger down on the enter key, bringing just over two hours of solid typing to a close.

I was in the family restaurant near my apartment building—the one where I had reunited with Aki—sitting in a corner where I had access to a power socket. I had rushed home after school, picked up my laptop, and then came here, ordering nothing but a drink with unlimited refills before focusing on my work.

“I’m finally done! My trip through hell is over...” I didn’t have to focus anymore. Stiffness drained from my body, and I slumped against the back of my chair. My manuscript was done, and now I could bask brainlessly in the euphoria.

I didn’t usually let things get this hectic. I’d done something insane: this manuscript wasn’t actually due till halfway into next month, but I made myself get it all done before this month was up. Canary-san said I could work however I wanted, as long as I didn’t miss the deadline. I still wanted to point out to myself how masochistic the whole idea was.

It was necessary, however. I needed to get everything finished before the class trip. No one was rushing me—I’d made this decision all on my own. This class trip was the first school event that Iroha-chan wouldn’t be involved in *at all*. It was a bonus stage, one where I was free to take any action I wanted, knowing that Iroha-chan wasn’t working to get closer to Aki the moment I had my back turned.

I thought it might be unfair of me, but Iroha-chan was always using every weapon and circumstance available to her to expose Aki to her charms and create a collection of wonderful memories with him. We’d already decided there would be no hard feelings between us, and that both of us were free to give this fight our all.

I was going to use this class trip to pull ahead—I couldn’t let myself get dragged down by deadlines. I had finished everything up now so I could focus on my time with Aki. That was why I’d spent the last few days distancing myself from him and pouring everything into my manuscript. Even the message I’d just sent was a single letter: “K.”

“Aaah, hot coffee’s so good at recharging my tired brain... I want sushi.”

The bitter fragrance spread over my tongue. The intellectual part of my mind had shut down, and now all I could think about was food. But I was so happy right now, I let myself express my dumb wish for sushi to myself out loud. There really was no more blissful moment than the one just after finishing a manuscript.

“Okay, I’ve got plenty of time. Now I can help Aki out a little more.”

It was clear from the snippets I’d caught from Aki’s classroom conversation with Ozu that he was looking to push *Koyagi* up to the next level. From his messages in the Alliance group chat, it looked like he was struggling to come up with a way to do that without relying on Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s drawings.

Now that I was free, I had time to help him. I could imagine him now, holed up in his room and grumbling to himself. I picked up my phone and decided to send him a message.

“H-Huh? Aki?”

I spotted Aki walking past the restaurant window then. He was in his uniform, accompanied by a golden-haired girl bobbing alongside him.

“Iroha-chan’s with him? And no one else...at this time of day?” I was pouting before I could stop myself. It was quite obvious what was going on; they’d stopped off somewhere on their way back from school, and were only now heading home.

Wasn’t Aki supposed to be busy? And why was he with Iroha-chan?

An unpleasant fit of gloomy jealousy made my chest feel tight, and I put a hand up to it as if to try and suppress the emotion.



Only a few months ago, I would have seen that and let it send me into a spiral of depression. Not anymore.

What Aki was doing or what Iroha-chan was doing didn't matter. What mattered was what *I* was going to do. Nothing else.

I was going to support Aki as best I could, and get closer and closer to him. I just needed to keep at it, and eventually he would notice me in the way I wanted him to.

"No way I'm letting her win."

Determination set my mind straight as I watched them disappear in the direction of our apartments.

Chapter 4: My Cousin's Mom *Really* Has It In for Her Husband!

I sank into the hot water of my bath, letting the heat soak in all the way to my bone marrow as it gradually loosened up my rusty mind. Baths were *the* best place for coming up with ideas, and bathtime was precious to me. I was constantly working my head and my hands, and this was the only time I was doing nothing but relaxing, meaning I could focus purely on my thoughts.

It was the day—well, the middle of the night—after Iroha and I had gone to karaoke for some escapism. I'd spent the entire day trying to come up with something that didn't require Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's drawings and had nothing to show for it but a depressing void inside me.

I knew panicking was pointless. Panicking would hamper my judgment, and any plan I came up with as a result would just be dumb. Life was a series of decisions, and I was too average to get away with making the wrong one.

My relaxed sigh pushed through the steam in front of me.
"I can't think of a thing."

I might have been relaxed, but that didn't mean my sighs suddenly held inspiration. Still without any ideas, I got out of the bath and dried myself off with a towel. As though it had been waiting for me to do so, my phone buzzed from the basket I'd left it in with a LIME message from Ozu.

"Come to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei Land!"

I was instantly suspicious.

"After that weird message, I probably should've expected I'd be walking right into hell."

After getting out of the bath and receiving Ozu's message, I threw on some clothes to make sure I was decent, and within a few minutes, I was at the next-door apartment belonging to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Or Sumire, as she was also known.

"Ooh, you certainly know how to drink! I'll have to keep up!"

"Ugh... No... I shouldn't be drowning my sorrows at a time like this! If only I were stronger! Forgive me!"

“To plead to God, unnecessary. Drinking is the best.”

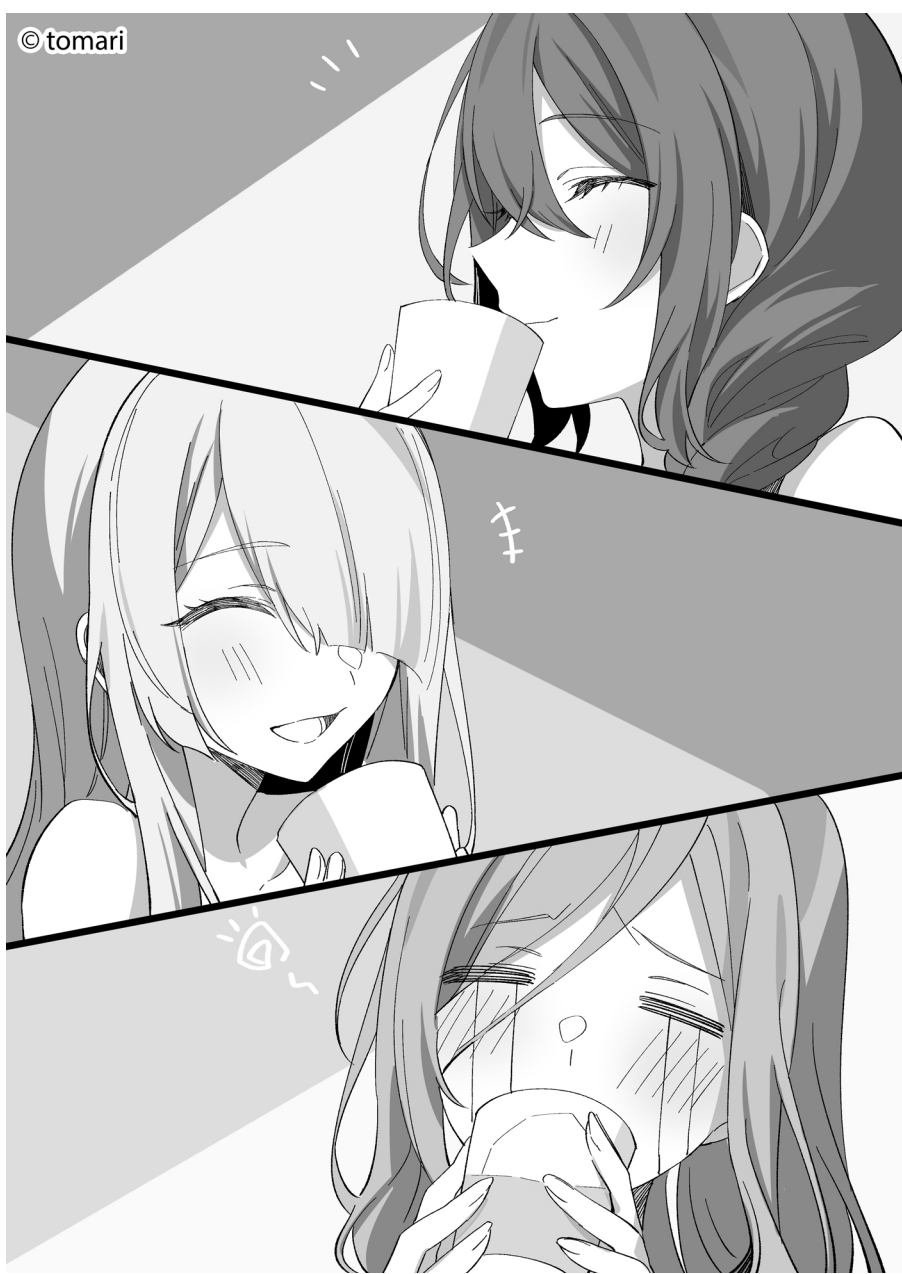
There were cans, bottles, bottles, and cans piled up everywhere. Sumire’s collection of nerdy goods was tidied away in her sacred bedroom-slash-workspace, a practice she adhered to just in case Midori or another relative suddenly came knocking, so the living room looked as normal as if it belonged to any old working woman.

There were three women, dead drunk, sitting around the low table piled high with evidence of their sin. Otoha-san looked as serene as ever. Mizuki-san’s cheeks were tinged with red and she seemed more excited than usual, but she was otherwise taking it easy. As for Sumire, she was...in floods of tears, for some reason?

“Don’t cry now, sweetie. This delicious whiskey should perk you right up!”

“It’s delicious, all right! But it won’t rid me of the humongous guilt I feel from betraying Aki!” Sumire wailed as she downed the drink Otoha-san poured for her.

So was I supposed to be forgiving her for drowning her sorrows, or for betraying me?



It wasn't like I was a monster, though. Just because she was busy and had to cancel her work for me, didn't mean I was going to deny her the odd drink—or even drinking party—to relieve some stress. I wasn't suggesting she drop her routine to maintain her mental health either.

“What the hell am I looking at here?”

“I can explain that.”

“Oh, Ozu. Didn't see you there.”

“They were running out of snacks, so they had me get more. I only just grabbed some from our place.” Ozu smiled wryly as he held up the bag packed with various snacks.

I hadn't realized Ozu was the type to respond to unreasonable, time-wasting requests—but maybe it was something that required the powerful pressure only his mom was capable of.

He turned to the three women around the table. “I've got what you asked for.”

“Oh, thank you, Ozuma! Why don't you come and join us?”

Ozu chuckled. “Don't be reckless, mom. You don't wanna end up in a tabloid for encouraging a minor to drink. This place might be bugged, y'know.”

“Tee hee! Don't you worry about that! I know my way around a courtroom.”

Aww, they were so sweet together. Wait, scratch that. I meant terrifying. Especially considering they were both smiling while holding this conversation. I felt like the phrase “like mother, like son” might apply here.

“Since you seem to understand what's actually happening, Ozu, mind explaining?”

“Mom showed up at Sumire-sensei's house with snacks and drinks. I was the middleman for that exchange.”

“Okay, but why?”

“Apparently, she wants to get to know her neighbors better. Then Tsukinomori-san's mom got involved, and it kinda turned into this drinking party.”

“Hold up, this makes no sense! Sumire-sensei's your mom's neighbor, I get that—but these three have barely even met before!”

“You'll understand if you ever enter high society, honey! It's always possible to enjoy a drink with strangers.” A gentle voice interrupted our conversation. I jumped—it was oddly intimidating.

Don't call me a coward if you haven't met her, okay? I promise she's scary.

“Anyway, as I was saying...” Otoha-san turned back to Sumire as easily as if a switch had been flicked. By the sounds of it, this was a

conversation they had been having just before I showed up.

“It’s interesting how they let you teach at Iroha’s school while helping Ooboshi-kun make his game. I didn’t realize that was allowed.”

I balked. *Could they be talking about a touchier subject?!*

The 05th Floor Alliance was fit to burst with secrets, but the fact that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was a teacher was one of the biggest! Kouzai was a private school, so it wasn’t as though the law barring civil servants from taking on second jobs applied. But as a full-time teacher, Sumire still had to stick to the regulations stipulated by the school. Those rules varied by institution, so there might have been some places where side jobs were allowed, but— Okay, you should get the picture by now:

Our school was not one of those exceptions. Sumire was breaking the rules by having a second job.

You know, I bet Iroha would find a way to make a statement like that sound all wonderful and exciting. But my friend’s annoying little sister wasn’t here right now.

Had Sumire really just leaked some career-ending information?

“I-I mean, if you’re asking whether it’s allowed, or about the *possibility* that it’s not allowed, then the only thing I can say is that said possibility is not *outside* of the realm of possibilities. In fact, it’s very much within it...”

If she lost her job as a teacher, I bet Sumire would make a good politician.

I had to wonder whether she’d also let slip that she was an illustrator... That *would* be seriously reckless, but then she was drunk and therefore following a different kind of logic...

“That must take a lot of strength.” Otoha-san’s tone suddenly turned gentle.

“Huh?” Sumire stared at Otoha-san, who was now gazing at her with a motherly love.

She put a hand to her chest as a symbol of her inner pain. “Working as both a teacher *and* a creator. I may not know anything about that, but I can certainly imagine how much work you must put in.”

“Iroha-ch— Kohinata-san’s so lucky to have a mom like you!”

At least she knew not to refer to Iroha as casually as she usually did. I thought the alcohol had oiled her tongue like the wheels of a runaway train, but it seemed there was still *some* rationality in there holding her back.

Then there was this:

“I may not know anything about that...”

The president of the world-famous Tenchido had guts, making a

statement like that with a straight face.

"I do! I put in so much work!" Sumire wailed.

"That's it, let it all out." Otoha-san gently stroked the sobbing Sumire's head, like this was the emotionally climatic scene in some teenage manga.

Only in manga, it was usually a character who worked hard day after day without complaint, until they finally vented their despair—that was why these parts were so impactful.

Sumire complained *endlessly*, making this particular scene fall flat.

"There, there. There's a good girl."

"Kohinata-saaaaa!"

"Oh, and if you wouldn't mind: who is Ooboshi-kun serious about? Iroha or Mashiro?"

"That's what *I* wanna know!"

"What are you talking about now?!"

Did she have to slip in a dangerous question like that so naturally?! There really was no underestimating Kohinata Otoha—No, I should be calling her Amachi Otoha! She got Sumire all loose-lipped just so she could get information out of her!

"It's perfectly natural for a mom to want to know who her little girl might end up dating. You feel the same way, don't you, Tsukinomori-san?"

"Yes. Agree. I'm of the same feeling. I want to know Mashiro's romance is serious."

"Wait, but I'm not—" I began.

"We didn't ask for your testimony, sweetie. No one in their right mind would simply throw their hands up and admit their guilt when accused of a crime."

"Please, Sensei. Spill some beans. Beans and truth. It is easier for everyone. But not the person who has to clean up beans."

Sumire sobbed incoherently. "I don't know! Oh, but you beautiful ladies smell so lovely!" A blissful smile crossed her face as the moms cornered her from either side.

Trust Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Although she looked like a pretty woman herself, she had the mind of a hormonal teenage boy. She was diving head-first into the honeypot with outright enthusiasm.

I guess I should just feel lucky that they were asking about something as benign as my nonexistent love life. It helped that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei didn't know about Iroha's involvement in the Alliance too, so I probably didn't have anything to worry about here.

It wasn't that I thought Sumire was a snitch, but there was always a chance that a pro interrogator would come along to trick information out of her—just like this. That was why I had never shared any big secrets with her. I never thought the day would come

when my judgment proved correct, though, and I had always hoped that it wouldn't.

"Y'know..." Sumire's eyes seemed to spin while moms encroached on her from either side—both physically *and* mentally. "Ooboshi-kun—Aki—only cares about making the Alliance bigger. Everything else...romance, youth, it all passes him by!"

Thanks, Shikibu.

But I guess there was no harm in them knowing that. I bet they wouldn't be happy with that answer, though.

Yup, I was right. Otoha-san and Mizuki-san were staring at me now, their eyes dulled by disappointment. I couldn't blame them. Being told that I was too focused on my goals and dreams to care about romance had to be the most boring response they could've gotten.

"May I be a little nosy, Ooboshi-kun?" Otoha-san asked.

"Um, sure."

"Have you ever considered focusing on your aspirations *and* romance at the same time?"

"Huh?"

The first thing that struck me was that I couldn't fault her suggestion. But wait—I'd already been through the thought process that led me to the decision to turn my back on youth and romance. I *had* changed up my priorities a little based on Canary's advice, but if I wanted my talented Alliance members to believe in me and let me lead them through the highly competitive race for a position at Honeyplace Works, I couldn't dedicate too much of my private time to unnecessary things.

Even when I'd finished explaining everything smoothly to Otoha-san, she didn't look convinced.

"I would think your Alliance mates will be having relationships and marriages of their own, don't you?"

My eyes widened. She wasn't wrong.

"M-Maybe, but this is about my personal abilities. I'm out of my depth trying to lead such a talented team, and I'm not cut out for a relationship either. I can only see myself failing miserably trying to juggle them both at once."

"Oh, I know!" Otoha-san raised a finger, and I prepared myself for some exquisite reasoning. "You're under the impression that being in a relationship means you need to be joined at the hip doing lovey-dovey stuff twenty-four seven, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, yes?"

I stared at her.

What?

"Am I wrong?"

I didn't answer her.

"Oh, I see. You're a virgin."

"He's a virgin boy. No experience. Some people are seeing the world this way. Yes."

"Aargh!" I yelled in agony, clutching my head and writhing. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but it *sounds* embarrassing!"

This had to be some kind of fetish for them or something, pointing out the virginity of a guy several years their junior. It was too much for my mind—enough mental damage to kill me ten times over.

"Love is different for everyone. Lots of couples flirt. But a relationship is more."

"R-Right." I knelt down, ready to listen attentively to Tsukinomori Mizuki-sensei's lecture on love. Since she was an actress, I had the sense that she'd actually know what she was talking about. "Now I ran from home. I know Makoto-san is worried. He thinks I have a man. That I am sleeping with that man instead. I will send a video to his house after seven days. That's what he worries about."

"Oh, I don't think he's *that* worried, so— Wait, actually, yeah. He's totally that worried."

"Of course I am not unfaithful or cheating. I want to pour all my love on him. But I am not contacting him. To make him worry."

"I think you *should* contact him. Otherwise this might lead to trouble that could've been avoided."

"No, I will not. I tell you why." Mizuki-san licked her lips seductively. "When he worries for me, all of Makoto-san's feelings are pointed to me."

"That's true, but that doesn't mean—"

"All his big, stupid feelings are pointed at me."

"I got it the first time. You don't have to repeat it in a more insulting way. So his emotions are focused on you now. Why does that matter?"

"Our love feels more real and exciting. That's why I run away sometimes."

"Wh— You're making it sound like some kinda fetish!"

Mizuki-san might have been insaner than I realized—either way, she definitely wasn't *normal*. She did say love was different for everyone, but this was totally taking that idea *way* too far!

"This is time number twelve. I last left home six months ago."

"Don't say that like it's something to be proud of. You can't fool me. Besides, don't you feel guilty for pulling these stunts?"

Not only was it manipulative, I bet it went against her wedding vows too, playing with someone's emotions like that. I was starting to see her as less of a person.

"Hm, but he cheats and is unfaithful every day. I balance the

scales. That's my opinion."

"Ah..."

Okay, that actually made sense. I didn't realize she was aware of the full extent of my uncle's shenanigans. Jeez, not only did he pull all this nonsense in the first place, he let his wife find out about all of it and manipulate him in return. It was hard to think of anything more lame.

In an odd way, it made me think they actually suited each other. To think such a dishonest pair could produce a kid like Mashiro, who couldn't lie to save her life. Unless she *was* good at lying, and had some massive secret I wasn't aware of. But I didn't want to go down that line of thought—it was way too scary.

"Yes, love is different for everybody, just like lifestyle. Just take your time, Ooboshi-kun, and I'm sure you'll get together with somebody one day!"

"Yeah... Listening to Mizuki-san's story made me realize *anything* is possible..."

"Oh?" Otoha-san giggled. "So, my Iroha, or Tsukinomori-san's Mashiro-chan? If you wouldn't mind sharing your preference, I would be ever so grateful!"

"Or Sumire-sensei. Choose one from three. Like the popular monster game. It's the same."

Tsukinomori-san seriously needed to cut that out, unless she was looking for a lawsuit. The queen who held the rights to that game—the CEO of Tenchido—was literally sitting right next to her.

I wasn't about to say anything, but even more terrifying was the fact that *Otoha-san* didn't say anything. She just sat there, smiling sweetly.

"You said love is different for everyone, right? Then could you please leave me alone? Everyone in the Alliance apart from me is a genius. I need to devote everything I have to supporting them, or there's no way a regular guy like me can be their leader. So—"

"If I may ask..." Otoha-san raised her hand, like a college professor about to pick apart a student's paper. "Why are these 'geniuses' quite so important to you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"These geniuses of entertainment. What is it about them that pushes you to sacrifice your youth just to watch over them? Are they really that special?"

I faltered. On the surface, it sounded like a simple question, but I could sense the less than pure intentions beneath. My answer should have been a resounding yes, but the sneaky nature of the question meant I couldn't respond like that.

"You don't need a whole team of geniuses to make a product, and

if they really *are* that good, they shouldn't need your product to find work for themselves," Otoha-san said.

I paused. "That would depend on the people and the situations they're in."

"A project that relies on a very specific group of talents doesn't sound especially stable to me. At some point, something's going to come along and interfere with your plans, and then everyone involved will be stuck with no room to grow." Otoha-san smiled. "Tee hee. You know, that day's already come!"

For a split second, I felt my anger rising to the surface, but I quickly suppressed it. I wondered if I'd be able to keep my composure if I said anything now. This was a part of the extreme rationalism she'd spoken to me about before. This woman saw her creators as pawns, not talented individuals.

If she were nothing more than some random manager I came across, I could just shrug my shoulders, tell her how interesting her ideas were, and go on my way knowing I'd never see her again anyway.

But this was the person who was interfering with Iroha's life and unfairly limiting her future potential. Coming from her, I just couldn't stomach it. At the same time, I couldn't let the full extent of my anger show. We couldn't let Otoha-san even suspect that her daughter was involved in voice acting, or our carefully arranged plan of attack would all be for nothing.

The thought of letting her get away with this was incredibly frustrating, and I wished I was able to shout back a rebuttal, but I had nothing. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei being unavailable at a time when I wanted to aim for three million downloads was exactly what Otoha-san was talking about.

But that didn't mean I agreed with Otoha-san's values, because that wasn't true in the slightest.

"If you don't mind excusing me, I'm going to go home. I'm getting a little cold, since I just took a bath."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Aki, I probably picked a bad time to call you over."

"Nah, don't worry about it." Ozu didn't need to worry about my comfort. But he also didn't need to worry about me exploding. "Thanks, though."

Thanks for caring about my health. And thanks for speaking up when my emotions were right on the verge of boiling over.

"I'm heading to bed. Don't drink too much, Sumire-sensei."

"Right... See you tomorrow, Aki—uh, Ooboshi-kun."

"See you."

Sumire raised an awkward hand—she clearly sensed something

was up, even if she didn't know what.

I turned to leave her living room, and that's when I noticed the door was half-open already. Did Ozu not close it properly when he came in? That would be out of character for him. Ozu did everything as properly as a carefully programmed robot.

I put my shoes back on by the door, and stepped out into the communal hallway.

"Ah!"

"Hm? What are you doing?"

I didn't know what she was doing there, but I found myself face-to-face with Mashiro, wrapped in her dressing gown.

Mashiro waved her hands in front of her face. "I-I wasn't...spying, or anything! I just came to check up on mom because she was taking a while. I wanted to go in, but you guys sounded like you were talking about something kinda awkward, so I was on my way back..."

"Oh. You heard all that?" This explained the half-open door.

"Y-Yeah... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. But, you know, Aki, you..."

"I was scary?"

"...Sorry."

She didn't need to spell it out for me to know what she meant. I really needed to get better at dealing with other people when it came to business. I let Otoha-san provoke me, and even Mashiro, who had been watching from a distance, could see how much it had riled me up.

"Who is Iroha-chan's mom exactly? That conversation made it sound like she's more than just a housewife."

"She's the CEO of Tenchido."

"Tenchido? Sounds like a dessert place. Wait, *Tenchido*?!"

"Yup. Tenchido. Not a dessert place, not a martial art; the games company. The globally famous one."

"Wait. That's impossible. There's no way someone like that actually exists!"

"Uh... A company's gotta have a CEO." Sure, it didn't have to be Otoha-san, but to claim the CEO of Tenchido didn't exist was taking things a bit far. "Anyway, are you really gonna doubt me here? Have you forgotten what *your* parents do? I'm pretty sure Iroha's mom is comparable to them."

"I guess my parents *are* pretty special. It's easy to forget sometimes because of their personalities."

I could see both her parents crying into their pillows if they heard her say that—mostly her dad.

"Still, Aki, there was this weird kind of...tension between the two of you."

“Our...ideas on leadership clash. To the extent I don’t think we could ever see eye to eye.” I knew Mashiro was worried, and I didn’t want to push her away now, so I explained the situation as best I could.

Otoha-san and I had two very different viewpoints. My strategy was to rely on a small, talented group and, as she’d pointed out, that approach meant we were now at a standstill when it was crucial that we up our numbers. I explained this to Mashiro, who listened without interruption.

“Why don’t you try a compromise?”

“What kind of compromise?”

“Well... You value Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s work, and that’s fine, but since she’s unavailable, why not call in another illustrator for help?”

“Have another illustrator work on *Koyagi*? I wonder what Makigai Namako-sensei would think of that.”

“I don’t mind.”

“What?”

“I-Is what he’d say, I’m sure! I’m a writer too, see? Though I’m still an amateur, I’m a professional in a way. I think, as long as you say it’s okay, Aki, no one else really has a right to argue with you. From a general outsider’s point of view, I mean.”

“Oh, right. It just sounded like you were answering *for* Makigai Namako-sensei for a second, and it kinda threw me off a bit.”

“C-Come on, Aki, how would I know what he’s thinking?”

“Good point.”

Makigai Namako-sensei was a college student and male, but I guess both he and Mashiro had their stories checked over by the same canary—person—so there was a good chance they had similar values. My gut said he’d probably agree to get in an extra illustrator or two, if that was what *I* thought best.

Did I think it was a good idea?

I tried to imagine our users’ reactions and how they’d feel seeing a character drawn by someone other than Murasaki Shikibu-sensei playing a part in the *Koyagi* world. If our illustrator wasn’t available, it only made sense to get someone else in. It was practical and, on the face of it, highly efficient.

But I needed to put far more thought into the decision than that. Our fans were watching the development team’s every move. If I misjudged this, they might lose a ton of trust in us, and a lot of the enthusiasm they had for *Koyagi* would dissipate. Trust was something that took a long time to build, but could be lost in seconds.

I needed to think. I needed to be sure this was the right choice. I couldn’t remember ever working my imagination this hard in my life.

Was this how Iroha felt when she was getting into character? How did acting not exhaust her? Especially when she was able to recreate someone's thought process perfectly every single time? She was incredible. A total genius.

"A genius..."

"Aki?"

There was never a need for me to get so worked up over this. I'd built up *Koyagi* according to my values, and that was *why* the fans trusted us and loved the game like they did. I trusted my team of geniuses, and I was sure our users wanted to see the culmination of *their* work.

"I need to go back to basics. No, we won't get in anyone new. We'll wait until Murasaki Shikibu-sensei is ready to start work again."

"But that means you won't be able to add any new characters or card art."

"Either we repeat older events, or I work hard to come up with something that doesn't rely on new content. Ozu and I will do what we can to tide things over, and then all we can do is hope that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei comes back as soon as possible. Maybe I'll ask Makigai Namako-sensei to help out too."

"Okay, that sounds like a good idea...but what about reaching three million downloads? Wouldn't it be way easier to gain popularity if you had new art?"

"Yeah. The most widely shared posts on the official *Koyagi* account are always the ones with new art or new character announcements, and those are the times we see our biggest increase in numbers too. There's no arguing with that; it's right there in the data."

"So—"

"But that doesn't mean we can just use anyone's art." I paused to think before explaining myself fully. "This world is full of talented people, and I'm sure that one of those would be perfectly capable of exciting our user base and increasing our numbers. But the world of *Koyagi* can only be drawn by Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. No one else. I honestly believe that."

"Aki..."

"Maybe I'm being overly fussy. Inefficient, even. I might be overthinking things too, it's just that—"

"No, Aki. I think you're absolutely right." I felt my hand being wrapped in something cool. Mashiro had taken my hand completely naturally, and was smiling at me as softly as powder snow. "You made the decision, Aki, so it's the right one. That's what *I* believe."

"That really makes me feel better." Just having even one person back me and my values up gave me enough strength to keep moving forward. I squeezed Mashiro's hand in return. "Thanks, Mashiro."

Mashiro flinched. I knew how she felt about me, and I knew it wasn't fair to do anything that might mislead her—but I wanted to show her that I truly was grateful. Although I was a teenage boy, I genuinely had no ulterior motives here.

"It's late, so I'm gonna head to bed. Make sure you wrap up warm so you don't get sick, Mashiro."

"Okay. You too, Aki. Button up your pajamas properly."

"I *always* button them up properly!" I let out an amused sigh, but gave a casual wave before returning to my room.

I'd made my decision: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was our sole illustrator. Now we just needed a good, efficient plan to grow without relying on her.

This was going to take *a lot* of thinking.

"The mermaid next door spoils you rotten, huh?"

"Ozu."

"Sorry. The timing was too good *not* to break out that reference."

"I totally understand."



The Sea Sake Alliance (2)



...



Makigai Namako

Got a sec, Shikibu?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hm? what's up this early in the morning?



Makigai Namako

I was wondering if I could help with the class trip.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

wait, are you coming on to me??



Makigai Namako

wut



Makigai Namako

You know who I am, but still react like that? It's weird.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i can't help it! i've just known 'makigai namako-sensei' as a hot, young, and handsome author for way too long!



Makigai Namako

Hot and handsome mean the same thing.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

leave it to an author to have such a powerful grasp of the language!



Makigai Namako

You're a teacher! Yours should be just as good!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

lol nope, i teach math!



Makigai Namako

Grow up.



Makigai Namako

Anyway, I want to help with the class trip.



Makigai Namako

If I free up some of your time by helping, you might be able to do some illustrations.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

oh, right. i see.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

thanks for the offer, but you can't.



Makigai Namako

Why not?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i can't make a student help me.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i gotta take responsibility as a teacher and see this job through myself.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

you're a student, mashiro-chan, so i just want you to have fun.



Makigai Namako

Hey! Don't type my name!



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

don't worry! it's not like i'd write it in the other chat by mistake!



Makigai Namako

Jeez, you seriously had me worried...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

relax, namako-sensei.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

once the trip is over, my work is done! i'll be back with you all next month!



Makigai Namako

Feels like it might be a long month...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

?



Makigai Namako

It looks like Aki wants to hurry up and get 3m downloads.



Makigai Namako

Lately, Honeyplace's been doing better on consoles than with mobile games.



Makigai Namako

He said we need to get our numbers up quicker not just to keep our connection, but so we can prove ourselves.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i had no idea aki was thinking that...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

yeah, i guess a month is a long time then.



Makigai Namako

That's why I want to do whatever I can.



Makigai Namako

I asked him if he wanted to get new artists involved, but he said he didn't want anyone but you to draw for Koyagi.



Makigai Namako

So I was thinking, if I helped you out with the class trip...



Makigai Namako

But yeah, it was a dumb idea.



Makigai Namako

Soz.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

i see...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hmm...

Chapter 5: The Maiden of the Library Shares a Secret with Me

“In first place, we’ve got Oda Nobunaga, Demon King of the Sixth Heaven. Second is Nightingale, the Lady with the Lamp. Third...”

There was one particular rumor about the library at Kouzai that sounded like it *could* be true. There was a place hidden deep, deep within the forest of shelves, where sunlight and sound never reached. There lived the ghost of a young maiden who read quietly, her long amber hair fluttering in the breeze from the open window.

She was the cursed maiden of the library. One of the seven wonders of our school—there may or may not be seven in total.

“Hmm... I’m not really sure these character polls are a good measure of a character’s popularity. They’re only really chosen by how strong they are during the investigation segments...”

The number of people who actually believed the rumor wasn’t that big, but rumors were powerful things. It was enough to keep people away unless they had a good reason to be here. All it took was one person to slip under the effect of the mind control, then their thinking became contagious and eventually melded into the group consciousness. The next moment, you’ve got a nice, quiet space for the people who started the rumor in the first place.

“The character with the most fan art is...the Furious Delinquent, Gokudou Taishi. Oh, yeah, he’s got a lot of female fans.”

Someone was sitting in that “cursed” space in the library, muttering to themselves, but it wasn’t the cursed maiden. It was a guy:

Me.

I sat with my back leaning against a bookshelf, staring at the screen of the laptop on my knees while I tapped away restlessly at the keyboard.

“There are a ton of devoted fans, but I can’t ignore the silent majority. There are gonna be characters who are low-key popular...like this Murderous Ice Maid, Kirie. If there’s one thing Makigai Namako-sensei’s darker work has taught me, it’s that these cool chuuni characters are pretty popular in general.”

You might be wondering whether we were allowed to bring our laptops to school. The answer is no. Our school was no different than most, and it was totally against the rules. If anyone found me, I’d be in

trouble. That was why I had casually spread that rumor about one of the school's seven wonders, to create a space for myself where no one would find me.

Besides, it wasn't like breaking school rules was *a crime*. Incidentally, it was also against school rules to use your phone outside of an emergency. No one followed that rule.

Correction, no one except a small group of ultra-serious honor students followed that rule. Still, it wasn't like "everyone else is doing it" was a good way to justify rule-breaking in any case.

"Hmm... There's gotta be a more suitable character in here somewhere..."

"Senpai! What are you doing, muttering to yourself in a dank pit like this?"

"I'm trying to work out which character's event we should re-run. I wanted to get a few ideas together for what to do till Murasaki Shikibu-sensei comes back."

"Jeez, Senpai, could you have made your response any more boring?"

"Well, what do you want me to say?"

"Um, how about: 'I got so horny in class that I came here to fantasize about you!' How's that?"

Her tone of voice played right on the thinnest strands of my patience. I could practically hear the blood vessels in my temples snapping (not really, though, because then I'd be dead). At the same time, it sent a surge of power to my brain—enough to switch on a light bulb.

"That's it! I know whose event to rerun!"

"Oh? Sounds like I gave you a flash of inspiration. Say 'thank you,' Senpai!"

"Thank you! Genuinely!"

"Whose event is it then?"

"Kokuryuin Kugetsu's."

"Uh... The character we literally only just added?"

"That's true... Ugh! But there's no other character that'll make everyone happy! Anyone else we pick'll just make people complain!"

"Wow, Senpai, I never thought I'd see *you* forget about the facts and numbers. You must *really* love Kugetsu-chan, huh?"

"Yeah, I love her—look how cute she is!" I paused. "Wait, Iroha... Since when did you get here?!"

"I've been talking to you for like, five minutes! You're way too focused on your computer!" Only now did I see Iroha's face peering around a nearby bookshelf. "Can't believe you're wasting your precious lunchtime on work! You really *are* a workaholic!"

Iroha approached and sat down in front of me, holding her knees.

I averted my eyes. Her skirt was too short to be sitting like that and not showing off her— You know, why did Iroha have her guard completely lowered like this anyway?

“You shouldn’t be sitting like that in front of a guy, Iroha. It’s indecent.”

“Just what era are you from? You need to stop being so obsessed with girls’ skirts.”

“I’m not obsessed.”

“Flash!”

“Gah!”

Iroha grabbed the edge of her skirt and lifted it up—except she only pretended to, but the movement made my eyes widen. Not widen to *stare*, but because I was surprised that she would do something like that and...

“Flash! Flash!”

“Stop it, you perv! You’re not supposed to flip the skirt yourself. That’s what bullies do! How the heck do you have so much control over what you show when doing that anyway?!”

“Your reactions are too funny, Senpai! And that fire burning in your eyes! Yum!”

“You know, for the maiden of the library, you’re not very maiden-like.”

That’s right. The fake maiden of the library was actually Kohinata Iroha. I’d been working to spread the seeds of that rumor since last year, before Iroha joined our school. It wasn’t until she took to this spot in the library herself that the rumor stuck; the whole “amber-haired maiden” part of the story had only started this year.

The shelves here only held boys’ love books of the “aestheticism” subgenre, already putting them in a niche category. Iroha came here for those books, which eventually stopped people coming here altogether—giving me a perfect space to work without being disturbed when I needed it.

Said “pure maiden” had totally destroyed her own image with her indecent behavior, and was currently pouting in my direction.

“But didn’t you *tell* me to be more annoying, Senpai? Remember how insistent you were at the culture festival?”

“Uh... Yeah, but I didn’t mean you should be annoying a hundred percent of the time. I want you to learn how to be annoying when the time and place calls for it.”

“Would you quit moving the goalposts already?”

She had a point. A point I couldn’t argue against, so I changed the subject instead.

“You here to read?”

“I was!”

“Not anymore?”

“I came to check out a book Sumire-chan-sensei recommended to me, but then I found you here and my plans changed. Instead, the perfectly imperfect beauty Iroha-chan came to ask you an impromptu twenty questions!”

“No one likes a pest no matter how ‘beautiful’ they are... At least, I don’t think so.” I was suddenly unsure of my statement.

“Ah, someone’s coming. You should hide your computer.”

I looked up, and then my ears picked up a *clack, clack, clack* coming from the other side of the bookshelf, getting conspicuously louder. I hurriedly closed my laptop and hid it behind my butt. I rearranged my features into something neutral that wouldn’t arouse suspicion from anyone, be it teacher, student, or librarian.

“Here you are, Ooboshi-kun. How nice to see you. Bye now!”

“Wh— Wait!”

Kageishi Sumire turned to dash away almost as quickly as she’d come, like a metallic monster fleeing on the first turn of battle. I grabbed her arm to stop her.

“Why are you running?”

Hadn’t she come here because she wanted to talk to me?

I thought it was a very reasonable question given her behavior, but when Sumire turned to me, her eyes were glossy with tears.

“Clearly you and Iroha-chan are having a secret rendezvous! What kind of shipper would I be if I interfered?!”

Her logic was as garbage as ever.

“I assume this is important, since you came to find me during lunch?”

We’d managed to get Sumire to calm down, and now she, Iroha, and I were together at the cursed maiden’s spot in the library. It seemed that not even the library committee members on duty liked to come near here if they could help it, but I still felt restless with so many of us crowding the same spot.

“What was that book you recommended again? The sports one with the teenage boys getting all sweaty and emotional with each other?”

“Oh! I think it should be right around here...”

“Answer. The. Question.” I punctuated each word with a jab to one of her pressure points.

“Ow! Not the shoulder! That one hurts!” Sumire smacked my hand, signaling that she wanted to tap out. That it hurt so much was proof she wasn’t taking care of her body. She should really do something about that. Though I knew full well she didn’t have much time for exercise right now.

“You came looking for me, right? Tell me why.”

“Oh, right! Sorry, the shock of walking in on your secret rendezvous totally wiped it from my mind.”

“Stop calling it that.”

Was there no end to her wild delusions? It was already super annoying that she tried to ship me with Ozu, and I wasn’t going to let her off here just because Iroha and I were of opposite genders.

“C’mon, these delusions feed directly into my creative powers! Anyway, as for why I came to see you...” Sumire glanced at Iroha—who was eagerly rummaging through the shelves in search of the recommended book—and then leaned back against one of those shelves herself. “I’ve decided I’m gonna draw this month after all.”

“What?”

“You can keep ordering more drawings from me. Just leave it to your old pal, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei!” Sumire grinned, jabbing a thumb into her chest. That gesture alone tempted me to trust her like I would a battle-hardened soldier. If she was serious, her offer was *really* helpful—yet I couldn’t help but doubt her.

“That would be a great help...but didn’t you ask to stop drawing because you had too much on your plate? Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Don’t sweat it! I thought about it, and I realized I’m too soft on myself!” She laughed, a little bashful. The sound was a far cry from anything venomous or queen-like; it was very much a Murasaki Shikibu-sensei thing. “If I’ve got time to drink in the evenings, I’ve got time to keep working!”

“I guess, yeah. But I don’t want to get in the way of you enjoying a drink. Except maybe for the times you’re totally drunk right before a deadline.”

“The only reason you can say that is ‘cause you don’t know how much time I spend drinking! If I cut it out, I can work forever!”

“That’s the most pathetic thing I’ve ever heard, yet you sound so proud...”

“I’m calling this plan the ‘Gold Mine of Time’! I’m an Alliance member too! I won’t let you suffer by yourself.”

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei...”

Her plan name sucked, and her reasoning also lacked the *oomph* I’d expect for the climax of a story. But the power with which she said her words made my chest throb with emotion. I’d been working my brain hard the entire day, first to decide whose event we’d repeat, and then to think how we could add something new to it so that it wouldn’t lack novelty. As time slowly passed, I was getting more and more panicked as it dawned on me that none of my plans were good enough.

I’d come face-to-face with the hard limits of what I was capable

of. The fact that things were so easy when I had Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to rely on and so impossible when I didn't. Her proposal to return to work had me genuinely relieved and overjoyed.

Yet I still couldn't shake my doubts. How many times had she come whining to me, done her best to meet my deadlines, and failed anyway? How many times had things gotten *this* close to falling apart because of *her*? This was the first time she had asked me to give her a break too, so I could only imagine how tight her schedule must be right now.

Or did this mean that she had just been whining with very little basis again?

"So, please gather up all your drawing requests and send them my way! I'll draw you characters so sexy they'll make anyone hard!" She cackled.

"Don't go overboard. I don't want *Koyagi* to get banned from the store."

I wasn't sure she should be making such a proclamation in front of one of her students either. Especially with our (fake) maiden of the library standing so close by.

"Whoa! What is this?! Why does our school have this?!"

"Aha! I know exactly which scene you're on!"

"I bet you do! The protagonist lost the match, and now his rival came to chew him out. But that's 'cause he *knows* the protagonist's personality, and that it's what the protag *wants*. It's perfect! My heart can't take it!"

"Oh my God, you totally get it! I literally died reading it on release day!"

"Rip! This is so worth it, though!"

"Totally worth it!"

Iroha and Sumire gushed over their shared experience with Sumire's boys' love book. They were acting like everything was fine, and I couldn't help but sigh. Maybe I didn't have anything to worry about. It was hard to judge when all I had to go on was Sumire's word. There was always the possibility that she was ignoring her own limits in asking me to give her more work.

I decided my only option was to give her a little test after school.

Once lessons were over for the day, I headed for a certain classroom in the science and art block. It was the classroom the Nevermore Executive Committee had used for their culture festival-related activities. Now it was being used by the Class Trip Committee; it often changed hands like this, depending on the school calendar.

I was here for one reason, and one reason only: to check on

Sumire.

If it looked like she was on top of her work, I'd be satisfied. If she seemed tired and drained, I wouldn't be asking for any illustrations from her.

The classroom door was closed. I carefully slid it open halfway to make sure no one would notice me, and peered inside.

"Why don't we do a tour of the places that appear in *The Tale of Genji*?" A familiar voice reached my ears: a voice that I'd started associating with school events in general lately.

She was top of our year and got perfect marks in every single test. An honor student without equal. Lately she'd even grown into a walking Midoripedia of health and physical education and, despite her brains, she'd developed a reputation for being a lovable airhead. Her name was Kageishi Midori.

She sat at the head of the table, surrounded by a number of other students with serious expressions.

"That's not usually the first thing people think of when you mention a class trip to Kyoto. Are you a fan of *The Tale of Genji*, Midori-san?"

"Yes, I like it the best out of all classic literature. Its sense of aestheticism is truly wonderful."

"That reminds me, Murasaki Shikibu, the author—her grave is supposed to be in Kyoto."

"That's right! In fact, I was hoping to go and see— Oh, but of course I don't intend to make decisions on our class trip based on my personal feelings!"

The other girl laughed. "I don't think it's that big a deal if you do!"

Midori was as popular as ever. It almost felt like fate that Murasaki Shikibu was her favorite classic author, though. It was the same as Sumire's pen name. Either their likes aligned because they were sisters, or growing up together meant they influenced each other.

"Hey, got an idea for ya."

"Otoi-san! Please, feel free to share any and all ideas you have!"

Otoi-san was here too? She had joined the Nevermore Executive Committee on Midori's request, but I never thought I'd see her on the Class Trip Committee too. Like last time, there had to be something lurking beneath her participation. Like a chance to eat all the candy she could ever want.

"We gotta go round all the shrines and temples, don't we? The trip's all 'bout broadenin' our horizons by lettin' us come into contact with Japanese culture and history, right, Kageishi?"

"That's exactly right, Otoi-san. As students, it's our duty to learn

all we can about historical buildings! *That's* what a class trip to Kyoto should be about!"

"You said it."

That sounded like something an honor student would say...not Otoi-san. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Had helping out Midori opened her eyes to the virtues of altruism?

"The Kiyomizu-dera temple is famous for blessin' people's love, right? It's gonna be fun watchin' a bunch of lovestruck teenagers tryin' it. I bet it'd inspire some new music."

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"Students have a duty to learn."

"Ah. I must have misheard you. I thought you were speaking nonsense for a moment!"

"I'm no-nonsense, you know that. Else, why would I go an' join this committee at all?"

"Yes, exactly. You joined the Nevermore Committee because I asked for your help with the sound, but this time you volunteered solely of your own volition."

"See? It's 'cause even if I do nothin', you end up doin' all the work, and it means I don't hafta do anythin' to get what I want to happen. It's the best."



“Sorry, what did you say? I didn’t quite catch that.”

“Said you were a hardworkin’, reliable girl.”

“What?! P-Please, stop teasing me! This is a working environment!”

I was wrong; Otoi-san’s eyes were still firmly shut, and she was still firmly Otoi-san. The only thing she’d learned from helping Midori was how to be a parasite.

All the while, Midori seemed totally oblivious to the fact she was obviously being used. She really was such an honest girl that I couldn’t help but worry that one day, someone bad would step in to take advantage of her. I could totally see her joining one of those “sports” clubs at college where the sport is just a cover for endless drinking parties.

“It sounds like we’re all agreed then. Shall we summarize everything?”

While I was busy worrying about the honor student’s future, a more mature, authoritative voice tightened up the relaxed atmosphere.

“Y-Yes, Sumi— Kageishi-sensei! So, we’d like to do a tour of Kyoto’s traditional shrines and temples. Are there any objections?”

“No!” Everyone else answered as one.

“Very well,” Sumire said. “I’ll see if I can find a hotel from where we can visit as many shrines and temples as possible.”

“Thank you! But are you sure?” Midori asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I mean, about making this a job for the committee. I’m sure it will be difficult to find a hotel with enough space for the entire second-year cohort. I can only imagine how much trickier it will be when you need to take into account the places we actually want to visit.”

“Are you saying I ought to leave this to the school to deal with?”

“Yes... It’ll be easier on you.”

Sumire chuckled. “You don’t think much of me, do you?”

“What? No, that’s not what I—”

“I know. You’re kind, Mido— Kageishi-san. You’re just being considerate.”

“Well, yes. Most years, the students don’t have to worry about the accommodation, is what I mean.”

“I appreciate it, but you don’t need to worry.” Sumire stroked Midori’s hair, and in that moment she was more a kindly older sister than a gorgeous, domineering teacher. But that Venomous Queen came back in an instant. “My policy is to carry out my work perfectly, both in- *and* outside the classroom. I refuse to let anything be done

half-heartedly. Committee!”

“Y-Yes?”

“I expect you to work to the best of your ability to put together the greatest class trip this school has ever seen. Decide on the route, then calculate the budget. Find out which locations require booking. Start drawing up the guidebook we need on the day. Kageishi-san, you’re in charge of delegating the tasks. Don’t let me down.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! I’ll do my best!” Midori straightened up and saluted.

Sumire gave her sister a confident nod, then opened up her laptop and got to work herself.

She must have been doing her regular work while overseeing the meeting. Now *that* was efficiency. Her Murasaki Shikibu-sensei persona was so utterly pathetic that I forgot she was actually an outstanding human being. It was on full display now, as she carried out her teaching work.

It was no wonder Midori admired her so much. Even now her eyes were wide and dreamlike, and she was patting at the spot on her head that Sumire had touched.

“I guess she’s fine...” I muttered.

Sumire wasn’t taking everything on by herself—she was delegating tasks to the students where possible. The tasks were well organized, and she was only focusing on the ones that required a teacher. It looked like taking on more illustrations wouldn’t be a problem, just like she’d claimed.

I let out a sigh of relief, closed the door silently, and made my retreat, keeping my footsteps as quiet as possible.

That was the most pressing matter dealt with—but I couldn’t lay all our hopes of reaching three million downloads on Murasaki Shikibu-sensei alone. We had her illustrations back, but now I needed to come up with a plan for how to use them. Nothing was going to happen by hanging around after school indefinitely, so I hurried for the main entrance.

The hallways were quiet as I walked them alone. The students who didn’t have club activities had mostly gone home. When these corridors were overflowing with students, I never paid any attention to the faces I passed. On the flip side, when the corridors were completely empty like this, it meant I was more likely to catch sight of any student standing or sitting around, even if they weren’t doing anything in particular.

Like those over there, for example.

When I came down to the second-year shoe racks, my attention was unconsciously drawn to two female students sitting in the hallway.

“You’re finally here, Senpai! Did you take the scenic route or something?”

She was a familiar face. More than that, she was my friend’s little sister.

“I had something to take care of. Does that mean you were waiting for me?”

“Yup! I’ve got a bit of a situation here, and I need your advice on something. I’m ambushing you because you didn’t read my LIME message.”

“LIME?” I looked at my phone. “Oh, hey, you *did* send me a message.”

Whenever I wanted to focus on work, I muted any unrelated LIME groups. Technically, Iroha did send me work-related messages sometimes, but she was an exception; she got muted. She had a habit of spamming me with nonsense when I was particularly busy.

I knew Iroha’s recording schedule like the back of my hand anyway, so I knew when it was safe to mute her and when it wasn’t.

“You waited by the shoe racks too—so you knew I was still in school, huh?”

“Yeah, your shoes are still here.”

“Oh, right. I guess that’s a good way to tell.”

“It’s all that training I’ve had scouting out the best time to mess around with them!” Iroha winked at me.

“Way to make poor use of your time, idiot.” *Wait* a second. I know I endorsed her peskiness, but this was probably something I needed to address for the sake of her upbringing. “Listen. You’ve seen those ‘pranks’ they do on TV that are really just uncomfortable to watch? There’ve been a lot of complaints about those lately. You wanna be an actress, right? So you should pursue an annoyingness that’s more wholesome, one that’s not gonna get you canceled if you’re—”

“Ah! Wait, Senpai, stop talking right now!”

“Huh?”

I was only trying to help her distinguish between what sort of teasing was okay and what wasn’t, in my capacity as her producer, but now she was looking at me like I’d just made a major blunder.

“Aaargh! I can’t take this anymore!”

Now that I was in high school, it had been a while since I’d heard anyone whine like a grade schooler. I did say there were two girls sitting here, didn’t I?

There was indeed another next to Iroha, her face pale with despair and her lungs gasping for breath.

It was Tomosaka Sasara. She had recently become Iroha’s best friend, and while she was a bit of a weirdo, she had a top-tier sense of beauty and was a popular, first-rate Pinstagrammer.

“Tomosaka?! You look awful...”

“Waaah! Ooboshi-senpai!” Sasara threw herself at me, tears and snot streaming down her face. Clearly she forgot to pack her usual charisma before heading to school this morning.

I shot Iroha a troubled glance. “Did something happen? Is this about a boy or something?”

“I’ll explain. You see...” While patting Sasara on the back like she was comforting a baby, Iroha began an explanation interlaced with the occasional sigh.

As Sasara was a social butterfly, she and I were polar opposites. Anything that could make her as flustered as this had to be one of those teenage girl problems that I’d never understand. So I prepared to listen to Iroha’s explanation while knowing I wouldn’t be able to relate one iota (sorry, Sasara).

“Sasara’s getting canceled on Pinstagram.”

“Tell me everything.”

I couldn’t leave *this* alone.

“I knew this’d happen to her.”

“Ozu. Be nice.”

“Tomosaka-san’s the type to go full-on offensive, without any kind of defensive mechanism in place at all. Did *you* think she could survive online in peace forever, without any recourse?”

“Well, no...”

“She literally spouts her prejudices against nerds with no filter, so I’m not surprised she stepped on a land mine by accident. Or did you think—”

“Sorry. Honestly, I also thought this would happen at some point.”

“Right?”

“But we don’t know if Tomosaka’s actually done anything wrong yet, so try not to judge her too harshly at this point.”

“Fine. Tell me how the rest of this goes, then.”

Chapter 6: The Internet Has It In for My Friend's Little Sister's Friend!

Sasara was sobbing—

“Are you crying or eating? Make up your mind.”

—but she didn't stop shoveling the pancakes on her plate into her mouth.

We were at a fancy café in front of the station. The place was packed with girls in uniform, ranging from early teens to late teens, laughing happily as they chatted with one another. This café was (apparently) famous on social media for its pancakes. There were barely any boys here at all.

I was awkward in social settings at the best of times, but at this table I was about two extra levels higher on the “feeling out of place” scale. Luckily, there was someone cheery here to lighten the mood and balance things out. It was Iroha. Not that I have to tell you that.

“Oooh! These are *good*! You left your blueberries, Senpai! Finders keepers!”

“Hey! I didn't ‘leave’ those! I was saving them till the end because they looked good.”

“Too slow! If you don't take what you want quickly in life, there's always gonna be somebody who snatches it away first!”

“Are you guys here to flirt or to cheer me up?” Sasara sobbed.

I guess with the two of us being so noisy, we didn't stick out as much as I thought. Also, I'd refer Sasara to my earlier question.

“So, you're getting a ton of hate comments and messages on your Pinsta account. How come?” Once I was sure Sasara's stomach was comfortably full of dessert and that she was able to talk properly again, I shot her my question.

“I was promoting mineral water for this company...”

“Promoting...”

For a second, it felt like my heart stopped. I realized then that I was glad I'd taken the time out to listen to what was going on. I still wanted her to promote *Koyagi* in some way if possible, so if she was having trouble with PR, then this whole thing concerned me much more than I thought.

“So there was something wrong with the water?”

“The celebrity who's in the water company's ads on TV cheated on his wife. Now everyone thinks the company's trash for using him, and

they also think I'm trash for promoting the same water."

"Huh?" I didn't quite process what she said, but it sounded super weird. "Mind repeating that?"

"The celebrity who's in the water company's ads on TV cheated on his wife. Now everyone thinks the company's trash for using him, and they also think I'm trash for promoting the same water. I'm not saying it again. I don't even wanna think about the garbage that comes out of those haters' mouths..."

"So I *wasn't* hearing things..."

There was no denying what she'd said, but I still couldn't believe it. If Sasara was the one having the affair, I'd at least *kind of* get where they were coming from, but this just seemed totally unreasonable. I knew I could just tell her not to worry about it and leave it at that, but it was obvious it was hurting her, so I wanted to say something more than that. I gave it some consideration before opening my mouth.

"C'mon, haters are trash! You've seriously got nothing to worry about, Sasara! It's actually funny if you think about it. Lol!"

Seriously, Iroha, could you be *any* more direct?!

Maybe Sasara was just so sensitive that she blamed herself even if it wasn't her fault, so being too gentle with her actually had the opposite effect.

"I wasn't just gonna stand there and take it. I *did* fight back, y'know!"

"Fight back? How?" I asked.

"Stop picking on me. It's annoying. Who cares about some guy's affair?' Stuff like that."

"Talk about adding fuel to the fire!" Iroha was suddenly overcome with a bout of laughter.

"Don't laugh, Iroha..."

"Sorry! I just swear, this sorta stuff could only happen to *you*, Sasara!" She clutched at her stomach, wiping the tears from her eyes. She didn't stop laughing, even when Sasara began to batter her shoulders with her fists, her own eyes filled with tears of a different kind.

"C'mon, this really has me down!"

"I *am* sorry! I'll give you a bite of my dessert if you forgive me!"

"I'm not a kid."

"You don't want it?"

"I do!" Sasara ate the offering from Iroha's fork without hesitation. "Yummy."

I was glad that she was at least cheerful enough for something like this. It seemed that her plight hadn't caused her any serious damage. Even if she'd encouraged the hate, it still wasn't like she'd done anything wrong herself, so there wasn't really a way to pick apart

what she'd said in retaliation. I doubted she'd stay knocked down for long.

I left the pair of them to their adorable antics and looked down at my phone, where I looked up the incident. The situation was more or less as Sasara said. Celebrity infidelity seemed to attract a lot of interest, and the story had taken up much of the day's online discussion. Watching how easily society could turn on someone made me worry for Tsukinomori-san, who cheated as often as he breathed.

Having said that, as a third-party who didn't have any experience of scandals like this, it was easy to see that the people bashing Sasara for a random celebrity's unfaithfulness were barking up the wrong tree. It was obvious to me that the people trying to cancel her didn't like SARA, Sasara's Pinstagram persona, in the first place, and that her fans were defending her.

"It looks like most of your fans aren't worried about this."



“Some of them said they’re disappointed, though. This scandal’s dragged up a whole list of this actor’s previous love affairs. They’re saying he’s the enemy of all women. Some of them are even saying that *I’ve* got something going on with him!”

“I can see that, yeah, but they’re not your fans. Which comments are you talking about exactly?”

“Like this one here: ‘You’ve gotta be dating him if you’re defending a playboy like him! You know, I used to like you, SARA, but now I’m just disappointed.’”

“Whoever wrote that is not your fan.”

“Seriously? No wonder I didn’t recognize the name.”

The word “gullible” came to mind. I guess you would take these comments at face value if you weren’t used to the internet.

“You know, though, it’s kind of a shock to me, even if these people aren’t my fans.”

“Oh?”

“When I look at my content, I think I’ve come a long way. Like I’ve really gotten prettier and more positive, and I’m making other girls happy.”

“I know that feeling.”

It felt genuinely good finding out how *Koyagi* changed its players’ lives for the better. Whether geeky or mainstream, making people happy with your content was equally satisfying.

“I want my work to reach girls outside of my fan base, even if that’s just a single girl. So when they were telling me I’m an enemy to all women, or that I’m a slut who should just ‘eff off,’ it really got me down.”

“Yeah, that kinda stuff can really wear you down...”

I, too, wanted to put everything I had into my game, to make people fall in love with its stories and characters. I didn’t care if people who weren’t into games didn’t give a crap about my moe characters and insulted them. As far as I was concerned, they could move on and go be an asshole somewhere else.

If *gamers* thought *Koyagi* was boring, though, that would really hurt. As a producer, my job was evaluating the criticism to see if it was worth listening to, and making positive changes to address it. I might have been able to shut off my emotions and get on with it, but it would probably be even more difficult to hear that kind of stuff for the creators who worked on it.

“Who are these girls making comments like this?” I asked.

“Look at this one: ‘As a girl, I can tell you that slutty SARA totally sells her body to older men lol!’”

“That’s a guy.”

“Huh? Seriously?! But they say they’re a girl!”

“Listen, Tomosaka. Anyone who starts a comment with ‘as a girl’ is gonna be a guy ninety percent of the time.”

“I...didn’t know that. Wait, you’re kidding... You mean these people just go on the internet and tell lies?”

“What do you think, Sasara, as the girl who lied to our whole class and said she had a boyfriend?” Iroha interrupted, pointing at Sasara and grinning like a grade schooler about to get their friend in trouble. She’d taken the words right out of my mouth.

“Ugh... I just wanted everyone to be jealous of me. There was a *point* to that! But you don’t gain anything by pretending to be a girl on the internet!”

“It might have a point to certain people. Humans are different like that. Some of them work on motives you might not understand.”

Likewise, there would be those who didn’t and *couldn’t* understand why she and I did what we did. But we were talking about Sasara here. She was really popular; this might have been the first time she faced any real spite from anyone, online or in real life. Of course she was going to get anxious and depressed.

“You don’t need to worry. I’ve already put through a request to have this dealt with, and it’ll take no time at all.”

“‘Dealt with’? How?”

“We’re getting rid of the people harassing you. I say ‘we’; I mean ‘my friend.’ He’s the one doing the heavy lifting.”

I wasn’t just researching the incident when I was on my phone earlier. I was messaging my trusty partner Ozu over LIME at the same time. Though I was making a big deal of it, it really wasn’t.

“Could you delete these accounts harassing ‘SARA’? While you’re at it, get their personal info in case she wants to take legal action.”

“OK.”

A perfectly normal two-message conversation.

“Your friend?” Sasara asked.

“Do you know Kohinata Ozuma? He’s pretty famous in our year for being good-looking. He’s good at this kinda stuff. He’ll have it sorted in a jiffy.”

“Oh, y’know, I think some people in our class were talking about him. Iroha, isn’t he your—”

“Yup! He’s my brother!”

“I thought so! I got so mad when everyone was going on and on about how good-looking both of you are! So it’s your brother who’s working on this?”

“Not anymore. It looks like he’s done,” I said.

“Wait? Huh?! You weren’t kidding! Those comments have disappeared...and you don’t get weird search suggestions when you

put my name in Google either!”

“He did a whole night’s work in the space of ten minutes.”

I had no idea *how* he’d done it, and I wasn’t about to ask. Kohinata Ozuma was a genius able to do anything, usually inexplicably.

“Yup, I knew he’d have it done in a snap. Pretty sick, right?”

“Wait, Iroha! Did you know your brother could’ve fixed this right from the start? That’s why you were laughing this whole time?!”

“Bingo!”

“Hnngh! You should’ve taken me right to *him* instead of going through Ooboshi-senpai! Ooboshi-senpai was basically useless!”

“Hey. Sitting right here.”

Did she not care about my feelings or what? She literally just got slammed for putting her foot in her mouth online, but apparently that hadn’t taught her to think before she spoke.

“He wasn’t useless at all.” Iroha wagged a finger at Sasara. “My brother’s Senpai’s biggest fan, and he’s way more likely to go the extra mile for a request from Senpai than me. Right, Senpai?”

“Pretty much.”

“Huuuh? Your brother’s Ooboshi-senpai’s ‘fan’? What, you mean like he likes him or something?”

“He sure does! Anything Senpai asks him, he’ll do it right away!”

“That sounds more like he’s a slave. The heck? Unless... Are you *dating*?”

“We’re not. What is it with normies and making everything about romance? There’s more to life, you know.”

“Why are you talking like *I’m* the weirdo here?! My reaction was perfectly normal!”

Meaning my relationship with Ozu wasn’t. Not in her eyes, at least. But, well, she did have a lot of friends. Meanwhile, Ozu was my *only* friend. I only had a sample of one to work on, which clearly wasn’t enough. Maybe she was right.

“By the way, he said he’ll make a tool that’ll automatically detect and hide any mean comments. Hopefully, this means you won’t be bothered by any oddballs for a while. You can just relax and eat your desserts.”

“Right. Fank yew.” Maybe because she was vulnerable right now, Sasara accepted my words with uncharacteristic ease and obediently started eating her pancakes again. “Mmm! These are *so* good!” Her face lit up, and hearts flashed in her eyes (not literally). As long as she was happy, that was all that mattered.

“Y’know, I didn’t realize that getting caught cheating meant your career as a celebrity was over. Tough gig being famous, huh?” Iroha said.

“Being loved by a ton of people also means being hated by a ton of people,” I said.

“Hmm...” Iroha pursed her lips and fell into thought.

Right now, that sort of thing was totally irrelevant to her, but it wouldn’t stay that way forever. It was a negative experience that could happen to her once she revealed her talents and spread her wings out into the world. I wondered what she thought about it.

I made sure Sasara was still spellbound by her pancakes, then whispered into Iroha’s ear. “Don’t worry. No matter what trouble you get involved in, just ignore it and keep walking forward. Let me handle all the annoying stuff.”

“Senpai...”

“Supporting people with talent is my duty as an average guy.”

“You mean as a producer, right?”

“That’s right.”

Iroha didn’t say anything else.

“Well, and if you end up like Tomosaka did today. Of course I’ll want to help you out if something’s getting you down.”

“H-Huh! Excellent policy, Senpai!” Iroha’s voice was a little shrill, and her cheeks were red—something unusual for her. She smacked them from both sides, and then that mischievous grin returned to her face. “So what you’re saying is, I can get into as many scandals as I want! Gotcha!”

“That’s *not* what I’m saying. All things in moderation. Dumbass.”

“Breaking news! Actress passionately in love with her producer! Who knew this up-and-coming star was actually *married*?!”

“Don’t get *me* involved in your scandals! Forget fuel, trying to protect you in the middle of something like that is just gonna be adding an entire gas station to the fire!”

“Wait, so if that happens, you’re just gonna leave me to rot?”

“No, I’d...find some other way to protect you, I guess...”

“Oh? So you’re *prepared* for us to be passionately in love and have ourselves a scandal, are you?”

“I’m not gonna bother preparing myself for something that’s not happening. And you might wanna keep your voice down, or Tomosaka’s gonna overhear.”

“Heh heh, what a shame. Guess I’m letting you off for now.”

It was somewhat relieving that Iroha pulled herself back whenever she had her fill of teasing me. I did notice something that looked like embarrassment from her at one point, but she was back to her usual levels of hyper in no time, so I probably imagined it.

Hold on.

Sasara *hadn’t* overheard us, right? I’d stopped watching her, and I got the feeling we were kind of loud. I glanced nervously in her

direction.

“I’m gonna get totally addicted to these! They look cute, and they taste amazing! Aaah!”

She was still obsessing over her pancakes, like one of those game monsters you could keep throwing bait at to stop it from doing anything at all.

Anyway, considering Iroha’s insecurities, I was once again relieved that the two of them had formed this connection with each other. Sasara would have already experienced a lot of the issues that Iroha was likely to come across once she became famous. She would be a good source of advice for Iroha in the future—and for me too.

We learned from the faults of others. Sasara’s current problem was a plausible one for the Alliance as well. It just so happened that she hadn’t garnered any hate from her fans this time, but a real slipup could lose the fans’ trust in an instant, both in the product and its creators. It was important to have an open dialogue with your average users, and *Koyagi* was no exception to the rule. The annoying thing was that any message you sent to them wouldn’t necessarily be taken at face value.

For example, there was every possibility that our fans would interpret Murasaki Shikibu-sensei being “busy with her side job” as us being lazy and throwing out reused content as a stopgap or something, even though that wasn’t true at all. To the users, it didn’t matter what situation the development team was in. It wasn’t their responsibility to be sympathetic to the personal plight of our creators.

Thank God Murasaki Shikibu-sensei could draw for us after all. I knew how tough it had to be, juggling that on top of her work as a teacher, but at the very least I hoped she could stick it out till we reached three million downloads—just enough to join Honeyplace Works with our heads held high.

“Those pancakes were amazing!”

“I know, right?”

Time went by in a flash as I was wrapped up in thought, and before I knew it, Iroha and Sasara had thrown their forks onto their empty plates with a clang.

“I’m sorry for getting you guys so worried today! I’ll pay for you both, since I got you wrapped up in my problems,” Sasara said.

“Thanks!” Iroha accepted instantly.

Sasara may have been an outrageous girl, but an event like this would have been enough to get anyone down. Her offer was admirable—not to mention unexpected.

“I appreciate the offer, but it’s fine. I feel bad making a kouhai pay for me.”

This could easily be covered by the Alliance’s budget, but I wasn’t

going to mention that again.

“I’m way richer than other girls my age, y’know. I can cover this one easily.”

“I get that, I mean, you’re a popular Pinstagammer. That’s not the problem—”

“Whatever! I don’t need the lecture. Excuse me, miss!” Sasara held up a hand to stop me insisting and called over the waitress.

Watching Sasara, a skilled influencer, cover my bill at the table of a fancy café was quite the striking image. I was overcome with awe, that this was a member of the entertainment world who was capable of teaching me all kinds of things.

“Here’s your total bill.”

“Thanks! Now, how much is— Guh!”

“Is something wrong, Tomosaka?”

While checking the bill, Sasara began to rummage through her bag, before twitching just once, then freezing. Movement returned to only her arm a split second later as she moved it in her bag from left to right. Then in circular motions, like she was trying to conjure a whirlpool inside it.

I blinked, and suddenly she was tipping her bag upside down over the table.

They say girls’ bags are like bottomless pits, and sure enough, unfamiliar objects began to cover the table one after the other. Oh, but I did recognize that makeup pouch. Was it bad that I only knew what that was because she taught me all about girls’ self-care?

Sasara studied the items on the table, taking in each and every one. I watched as the blood drained from her face in real time, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“I left my purse at home...”

“You’re kinda...careless, Tomosaka.”

In the end, I covered the entire bill while Sasara dipped her head and apologized over and over. As for the part where I was feeling awe for her, I take it back. If you could forget about it, that’d be great.

“It’s apparently been made easier to take legal action against people slandering you online.”

“That smile makes it look like you’re planning to kill these trolls ten times over.”

“Never. Well, not unless they start targeting you or the Alliance.”

“Sure, kill them as much as you want *then*.”

Chapter 7: My Teacher Has Me Feeling Remorseful!

Bzzzz!

I woke up with a start that morning, courtesy of the phone buzzing next to my pillow. I pulled my hand out from under the blanket and pushed it away, then tapped on my phone's screen to switch off the alarm.

I repeated this action every single day at the exact same time. As usual, I was all set to follow my perfectly efficient daily routine.

Iroha hadn't been bursting into my room as often lately, probably because of her mom's watchful eye.

I was genuinely glad for that. It wasn't that I hated Iroha; it was just unnecessarily tiring having to put up with her nonsense so early in the morning.

I got out of bed and did some light stretching to loosen up my sleep-stiff muscles.

"Let's get this day started."

I switched on my PC, then headed for the bathroom like I always did. I washed my hands, gargled, rinsed my face, then did my skincare. The skincare thing was a habit I started for my participation in the Queen Nevermore Contest, but I found myself keeping it up daily since then. I didn't have any interest in making myself beautiful, but keeping my skin healthy made me feel more motivated for my work—though I was aware that was all in my head.

I put my uniform on, grabbed a pack of energy jelly from the fridge for breakfast, and began to eat as I returned to sit in front of my PC. I checked the latest changes in various stats from *Koyagi*, then after making sure there was nothing amiss, I moved on to my emails.

"Oh, she's already sent it! Nice one, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. I guess she can work quickly when she puts her mind to it."

She had sent me an email with an illustration attached. I had asked her for this picture last week, it was for a new event featuring our earliest popular characters.

We were going back to our origins. It was an opportunity for old-time fans to see a new lovable side to the characters they remembered so fondly, as well as a way to attract back dormant fans who had played in the beginning and gotten attached to the characters, but who had then drifted away once those characters stopped appearing

as much.

And since Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's art was available again, I had come up with *even more* ideas. Like running a social media follower campaign to get the event trending and attract new users. All that was left was to check the image itself, and...yup. She'd outdone herself.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei hadn't just drawn the characters and left it at that—the use of color and the style of this piece reflected modern trends, bringing it up to scratch with what was popular now instead of sticking with how she would have drawn them a year ago.

It had been around a week since Sasara's online troubles, and all the effort I'd put into this plan over that time was now coming to fruition.

“‘Thanks so much for the awesome work,’ and...send.”

After sending my email to thank her and accept the piece, I switched off my PC. Once I was done with the finishing touches of my morning, like brushing my teeth, I headed out to school.

I was determined to make full use of another peaceful, efficient day to strive towards my goals.

My plans came crumbling down the second I arrived at school.

“So... Since Kageishi-sensei is absent today, I'll be taking over your homeroom this morning. If whoever leads the bow could start us off—um, just do it as you normally would.”

Our assistant homeroom teacher—a young woman who I'd barely seen since the start of the year—was standing at the teacher's desk, obviously uncomfortable. Her expression was a mix of confusion and anxiety as she tried her best to lead the students, as though she was surprised to find herself there.

Her announcement caused a curious stir among the Venomous Queen's students, one which I felt just as keenly. For a teacher to miss work due to illness was, generally, fairly common.

Not so when it came to Kageishi Sumire. She was just as strict on herself as she was with others, and maintained perfect health. That was the impression she managed to pull off here at least, helped by the fact that she'd rarely been off sick. Once you peeled off the veneer, you'd see that her life was a mess; she was just robust.

But anyway, when the teacher who was famed for her health and near-perfect attendance was suddenly absent, the natural conclusion was that something irregular had happened.

That restlessness stayed in the air throughout the whole of homeroom. When it was over, the assistant homeroom teacher addressed me.

“Ooboshi-kun. Can I have a word?”

“Of course. What is it?”

“Not here. Come with me to the staff room.”

I paused. “Yes, ma’am.”

I sensed this had something to do with Sumire. I tried to be discreet as I stepped out of the classroom and walked with the teacher towards the staff room. Partway through, the teacher looked around to make sure there were no students nearby, and then turned to me, her voice serious and low.

“Ooboshi-kun. You live in the same apartment building as Kageishi-sensei, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I do. I didn’t realize you knew.”

“Kageishi-sensei mentioned it to me once.”

“We don’t see much of each other, but we do live in the same building, yes. We consider each other neighbors.” I tried to keep things vague. I couldn’t let too much information about the Alliance leak to someone connected to the school.

“I suppose you won’t know then, but...” The teacher hesitated. “Although I said she was absent because of illness, that’s not actually true.”

“It’s not?”

“No. We agreed in the staff meeting to explain it that way to keep it simple and not worry the students. The truth is— Oh, but Ooboshi-kun, if I tell you this...”

“I promise I won’t spread it around the classroom. I wouldn’t have anyone to tell in the first place.”

To my classmates who liked to gossip, I was as imperceptible as air. This teacher wasn’t aware of my sad state of affairs; she looked visibly relieved.

“The truth is, we...can’t get hold of Kageishi-sensei.”

“You can’t get hold of her?”

“When I couldn’t find her in the staff room this morning, I gave her a call, but it just kept ringing and ringing. She’s far too professional to just skip out on work without telling anyone, and everyone’s really worried about what might have happened. You’re her neighbor; I was wondering whether you might know anything.”

My breath caught in my throat. “I, um, don’t.” I suppressed the urge to pull out my phone, and shook my head.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“No, I understand why you needed to ask me. I’ll be going now.” I dipped my head and hurried away, opening up my phone the moment I’d turned the next corner.

My fingers were shaking. Sweat was sliding down my back. Red lights were flashing in my vision. I struggled to breathe, like the air in my lungs had whipped up into a storm. I tapped out a LIME message to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, only managing to send it after correcting

countless typos.

The “read” mark didn’t come up.

I tried calling her. I heard the tone. One second passed, then two...then ten. But I could still hear the tone. No matter how much time passed, it wouldn’t stop.

“You’re...kidding...”

My heart drummed out an unpleasant rhythm. My last contact from her had been the illustration I got that morning. According to the time stamp, she’d sent it at around three in the morning. The images running through my head all painted the worst-case scenario: an exhausted artist, dying quietly in her apartment where no one could reach her.

“Dammit!”

I ran. My phone case doubled as a key case. It had the keys to my apartment. Not just my apartment either, but the apartments of my neighbors and fellow Alliance members. We’d exchanged spare keys in case of emergencies. Emergencies like these.

“Ooboshi-kun? Where are you going? Classes are starting soon.”

A voice stopped me just as I was shoving my shoes on at the entrance. No one paid attention to me *ever*. Why did that have to change *now*? Irrational irritation prickling at my skin, I turned around to find myself face-to-face with Kageishi Midori.

“I, uh, have to go home early today.”

“Where’s your bag?”

“Uh...”

Why did she have to be so sharp? Queen of Honor Students and Committee Chairs Midori put one hand on her hip and lifted up a finger. Here came a lecture.

“You’re not trying to play hooky from your first period class, are you? You know you can’t do that.”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I’m...”

I wasn’t sure how to explain. Letting Midori know her sister might be in real trouble would probably send her into a panic. There was no telling how serious the situation was yet. It would be better to keep quiet until that much was confirmed.

“I’m in a hurry. If I don’t get there soon, I might be too late...” I tried taking a reasonable approach.

“Ooboshi-kun. Y-You can try to talk your way out of this all you want, but rules are rules.” But Midori refused to budge.

The only thing that could beat a stubborn goody-two-shoes like her was *force*.

“Midori!” This was a race against time; I couldn’t waste a single

second on honorifics.

“Ee-yes?!”

I grabbed her shoulders and looked her right in the eyes, throwing everything I had into depicting the gravity of the situation within my gaze. “I’m doing this for you too. Please...let me go!”

“For...me? Wh-What? Um, I don’t... You’re, um, st-standing too close...”

It was no wonder she was confused—but being as open with her as I possibly could was my only option. “Please. Please let me go. Pretend you didn’t see anything.”

“O-Okay. I understand.” Midori nodded, and I felt the tension drain from the shoulders beneath my grip. There was no time to wonder about the sudden docility in her voice.

“Thank you, Midori-san.”

I spun around, and then I was out the door.



Walking was too slow. I tracked down a cab and had it take me the rest of the way to the apartment building. I couldn't spare any expense right now. I needed every minute, every second I could grab to get to Sumire's place as quickly as possible.

The driver looked a little taken aback at a uniformed teenager showing up out of the blue, but he let me in without any questions. He must have realized from my face that this was an emergency.

I used my phone to pay the fare once we got to the apartment building, and dashed through the entrance. I didn't even have the patience to wait for the elevator. I grumbled needlessly at myself to hurry, to go faster, as I pushed myself up the stairs. Five flights had never seemed so far. The moment I got to Sumire's room—504—I unlocked the door and raced inside.

"Sumire-sensei!"

She wasn't in the entryway.

Not in the bathroom.

Nor in the kitchen.

Not in the living room.

So she had to be in the bedroom.

She was.

"Sumire-sensei! Are you alive?!"

Now wasn't the time to worry about intruding on a woman's private space. I was prepared to kick this door down if it was locked—but I managed to barge right on in.

There was a human lying faceup on the bed, unmoving. No...her finger. It twitched right then.

"Aaah... Is that you, Aki? Ow, ow, ow..."

"What's wrong?! Are you in pain?!"

"I-I'm... Yeah. It really...hurts..." Her face was twisting. It really looked like she was struggling.

I rushed up to the bed to help her sit up. Her breathing was a touch ragged, and she was sweating.

"Sorry about this." I put a hand to her forehead. It was cool. "It doesn't feel like you've got a fever."

Despite her labored breaths, it didn't seem like her lungs were damaged in any way. Combined with the sweat, it was more like she was trying to endure some sort of pain.

"Aki... What about school?"

"What *about* school? They told me you were missing and hadn't even called in sick."

"Oh...I'm sorry...for worrying you. When I woke up...I was in...so

much pain...I couldn't even move. My phone's...charging on the desk... I couldn't get to it..."

I turned around and looked at her desk. It had everything she needed for her artwork, and there, connected to a cable plugged into the wall, was her phone.

"You're going to the hospital. I'll call an ambulance."

"Oh, I don't think...you should."

"I *should*. You're in too much pain to move, and you don't know the cause. This is an emergency."

"I do...know the cause...I think." Sumire tried to get up to stop me making a call with the phone in my hand, but immediately sank back into the bed. "Ah! Ow! Ow!"

Something was clearly wrong, and I wanted to get her to the hospital as soon as possible—but if she had an idea of the cause, it would be a good idea to get that from her first.

"What is the cause, then?"

"Back...pain...I think."

I paused. Then, "Ah..."

"It's not...bad enough to be...my organs, and it's like my back...is on the verge of straining...or...it's just about strained...if you get me..."

"Can you lie on your front?"

"Y-Yeah, I should be...able to..." Pressing down on her back and gritting her teeth, Sumire rolled onto her front. The hem of her loose pajama top slipped up slightly, giving me a glimpse of the bare skin on her back. The situation hadn't allowed for it before, and I was only now realizing how defenseless she was.

That's enough, Akiteru. Dumbass.

I was a teenage boy at the height of puberty, but that was no excuse for letting such a gross thought enter my head in the presence of a vulnerable woman.

Go away, evil thoughts. Get lost... Okay, they're gone.

"I'm gonna touch your back, okay?"

"O-Okay...just be gentle..."

"Stop trying to be demure."

I could do this without thinking when things were normal, but now she was acting like a tragic hero, the situation seemed a whole lot weirder.

I closed my eyes and focused my mind to cleanse it of my wicked thoughts. I concentrated on the tips of my fingers. I put them on her back and hips, and pushed with the tiniest amount of pressure.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"It's so hard! Is your back made of iron or steel or something?!"

"Wait—Aki! I told you to be gentle!"

"I am. I swear I'm using minimal pressure."

I hadn't even pushed enough to break an egg, but it had brought her so much pain. Plus, her back had been absurdly firm to the touch. I knew what this was: her stiff muscles and warped bones were putting so much pressure on her nerves that it caused her severe pain, and she couldn't move.

"This is pretty bad. I can give you some temporary treatment right now, but once the pain's gone down a bit, let's go to the hospital."

"Th-The hospital? N-No..."

"You shouldn't be scared of the hospital at your age."

"But I am! What if I need surgery and they mess up and...!" She shivered.

"I don't think you'll need surgery for this. Even if you do, it's not gonna be that risky. I don't think so, at least."

"So you don't *know*!"

"You're a math teacher. Think about the probability. They don't mess up surgery that often."

"Either it succeeds or it doesn't! That's fifty-fifty!"

"I said probability, not semantics. How the heck did you get to teach math?" I sighed. At least she was well enough to complain about going to the hospital—that had to be a good sign. When I heard at school that no one could get in contact with her, I had started imagining the worst possible outcome. After that, seeing her acting like her usual self was even *endearing*. "Come on, just let me give you some first aid."

"Ugh..." Though she sounded discontented, she'd stopped outright complaining. Finally, it sounded like she was ready to be obedient and listen to me, which would make this whole thing that much smoother.

"Okay, I'm gonna start. I'll go slowly; just tell me if it hurts."

"Okay..."

"I'll start by pushing the tip in a little bit."

"Mngh."

"Does it hurt already?"

"A little."

"All right. Sounds like we need to get you to relax a bit."

According to a book I'd read on traditional massage, your physical condition was influenced by your mental condition. She'd been devoting herself to both her jobs, doing her very best and denying all forms of fun. The probability that it had triggered major damage from her back to her hips was high.

Her back and hips were so stiff that I couldn't reach the pressure points to relieve her pain, and it would be hard to realign her pelvis.

I rubbed my palm in circular motions over her back to help loosen them up, going as gently as I could.

"Ah... Mmng... That's good..."

“Glad to hear it. I’m gonna go a little harder now, so it’s gonna hurt too. I’ll be disconnecting the stiff bone and muscles, okay?”

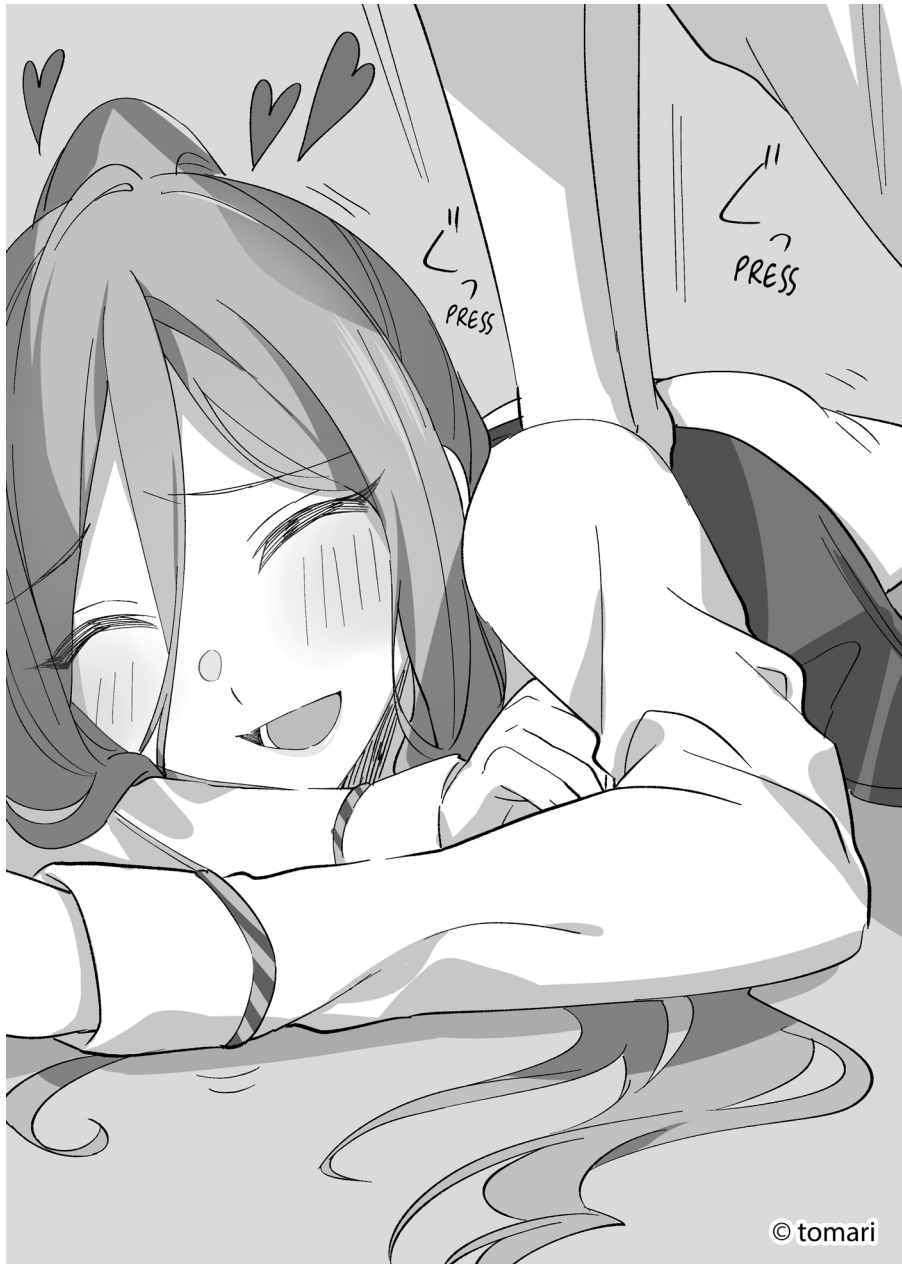
“Mmnggh. Aaah. You’re amazing...”

“Can you stop moaning like that, please?”

“What the hell? I’m just letting you hear my sexy moans in exchange for this massage, so shut up and enjoy them.”

“You sound like you can take some more.”

“Guorgh! Ow! Let up a bit, will you?!”



“Ugh. Jeez. Keep the sexy to yourself. I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Ha ha! Sorry! But you know, I was stuck here unable to move, and then you suddenly showed up. It made me think like you’re my hero.” Sumire chuckled, like she realized herself how outrageous the idea was.

If she was able to banter like this, it meant I was on the right track, and I kept on observing her behavior like that while I continued to massage her as carefully as I could. Sumire let me get on with it, and started talking less and less as the tension gradually left her body.

The silence gave me plenty of space for thinking. Thinking about Murasaki Shikibu-sensei— No, about Kageishi Sumire-sensei.

“I’m really sorry. This is my fault.”

Without stopping the massage, I made the apology that had formed from the emotions within me.

Sumire’s lips twitched a little. “C’mon, what are you talking about? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I sensed you were busier than you could handle, but I still chose to load you with extra work. I have no right to call myself a director.”

“I told you I could take it on. This is *my* fault.”

“I was honestly relieved when you said that too. With your artwork, I was sure we’d break through three million downloads in no time. I was so focused on that, I took advantage of you when I knew you were struggling.”

It was scummy, pure and simple. A true leader would have made her take a break, even if they had to force her to do it.

If only I could do more by myself. If only I could have come up with a way to attract more fans without needing to rely on new illustrations. Then Sumire wouldn’t have hurt herself like this.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” Sumire said.

“I don’t. I put myself first, and now you’ve ended up like this. So —”

“That’s what I’m saying. You’re wrong. You didn’t put yourself first. You put *Koyagi*’s success first. You put the Alliance first. That means you’re putting me first too.”

“That’s true, I guess.”

I knew she was trying to be kind and stop me from blaming myself, but she was mistaking what the crux of the problem was.

Every Alliance member had a close, personal stake in our project. That was a positive thing, but it also meant they sometimes lost sight of when to stop, and pushed themselves past their limits. I’d seen the phrase “job satisfaction exploitation”—that was, raising your workers’ satisfaction so that you could get away with paying them less—on the

news before.

I could remember seeing that before I started the Alliance, and vaguely thinking about how horrible some companies could be, while at the same time feeling completely removed from it all. I could only imagine how disastrous it had to be for any creative type to get caught by a nefarious company like that. I didn't want the people closest to me to end up at one of those.

Only now did I understand what that "job satisfaction exploitation" really was. It meant allowing your creators to keep working endlessly, so long as that was what they wanted. It wasn't a question of morals at all. Doing what they loved kept creators happy, and that was why they kept on working. If their creators worked and output beyond what was normal, management was able to make more profit, and so they were kept happy too.

If that situation could keep chugging along forever without breaking down, that would be perfect. It was when it did break down, leading to total collapse, that people criticized the company for "job satisfaction exploitation."

I was pretty sure now that's what the phenomenon was.

"I am...really sorry, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

"Aki..."

I wondered how my second apology came across. I was afraid to ask.

After that, I stayed silent and focused solely on working the kinks out of her back.

Mashiro: I'm sorry, Aki...

AKI: Where's this coming from?

Mashiro: I said some stuff to Sumire-sensei that I shouldn't have.

AKI: What stuff?

Mashiro: That you were in a hurry to reach three million downloads.

Mashiro: That you wouldn't accept any illustrations but hers.

Mashiro: It was because of all the stuff I said that she pushed herself like this. I'm really sorry.

AKI: No, it's not your fault at all. It's all mine.

AKI: Luckily, it wasn't as serious as it could have been either. You don't need to worry about a thing.

It was past midnight. I was out on the balcony in the night air, messaging Mashiro. Once I was done, I turned my phone off.

After I was done treating Sumire, I took her to the hospital to get her checked over. She didn't need to stay there or get surgery or anything; they said she just needed to take some time off work and rest at home. They gave her some painkillers and other pills, then sent her on her way. She was probably fast asleep in her bed at this very moment.

"I really messed up this time..." I mumbled to myself, leaning forward onto the railing and burying my face in my arms.

That Sumire's pain wasn't serious was nothing more than a silver lining. At worst, my decision could have done irreparable damage to her. It didn't matter that Sumire forgave me; I couldn't forgive myself. No, I *could not be allowed* to forgive myself.

The rattling of a window opening from the apartment next door interrupted my mire of self-loathing. I heard someone stepping out onto the balcony next to mine, before I heard the annoying voice I knew was coming.

"Penny for your thoughts, Senpai?"

"Iroha. How did you know I was here?"

"You kinda get this vibe when your neighbor's gone out to stand on their balcony, y'know?"

"I see. Still rare to talk to you over the balcony like this, though."

There was a secret entrance—well, a broken fire door—that separated our balconies, and usually Iroha would come over to my side through there. But the boxes that hid the hole from view were still piled up, and she didn't look like she was about to try moving them.

"Tee hee. Did you think you were speaking to Iroha-chan? Too bad."

"Huh? The heck are you talking about? I know that voice, and there's no way you're *not* Iroha."

"But I'm not. I'm her mother."

"What?!"

I watched as she leaned forward over the balcony so I could see her. It really wasn't my annoying kouhai, but someone who looked incredibly similar. An adult woman with an oppressive aura. My friend's mother: Kohinata Otoha.

"Otoha-san?! Wh— But you sounded just like..."

"Exactly. We're mother and daughter. We can sound awfully alike when we're in the same mood. The *real* Iroha is taking a bath as we speak."

"A bath?"

"My, did that get your imagination running? Oh dear. Please do describe the image of my beloved daughter you're holding in your head right now."

“Th-There is no image.”

Her tone was much milder, but I was starting to see where Iroha got her talent for teasing from. I didn’t realize that kind of thing could pass from mom to daughter.

Regardless, she showed up at the worst possible time. I wasn’t even in the mood for Iroha’s hyperness right now, so I definitely wasn’t in a position to let Otoha-san’s comments roll off my back. I needed to get out of here before my tumultuous mind could make me react in just the wrong way.

“I’m going back inside. Good night.”

“Oh my. There’s no need to run away from me. Especially not now, when you’ve finally realized how paper thin your strategy of relying on a teensy group of talent is.”

I froze halfway back to my door. I wish I hadn’t.

“Ozuma and Iroha told me all about it. About how Kageishi-sensei overworked herself and ended up injured.”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business, Oto— Amachi-san.”

“Come now, don’t be so cold. I realize you may hate me, Akiteru-kun, but I sincerely want to advise you and help you succeed, as someone who’s been through the struggles of directing myself.”

I didn’t respond.

“It’s not too late, you know. I really think you ought to hire some more illustrators to build yourself a more steadfast team. It would mean not glorifying a single talent, not being fully dependent on them. You only need to hire the minimum number of artists to get the necessary work done. Don’t you think that would be so much better?”

“I’m... I’m not running a factory here. Each of my team members does work no one else can reproduce. I can’t just substitute in somebody else and—”

“You can’t? What’s wrong with factories? They can be capable of producing some incredibly high-quality products, you know. You only think it’s strange because you’re clinging to your unrealistic dreams of the creative industry. But tell me this—what exactly makes it so different from any other line of work?”

“Emotion. Sensitivity. Techniques that have been collected over long periods of time...”

“Is it not because you’ve depended on those things that you’ve found yourself in this mess you’re in?”

“I...” I didn’t know how to respond. There was no way I *could* respond.

Otoha-san traced her fingers, pale white even in the dark of night, along the railing in front of her. Her narrow eyes opened just a crack wider than usual. “The word ‘genius’ is nothing more than a poisonous fruit. It looks so ripe, juicy, and delicious. But when you eat from it,

your body starts to rot from the inside—so slowly that you won't even notice. You're still young. The poison has intoxicated you, but it hasn't yet destroyed you." Her voice was cold, and there was no kindness to her warning. Nor was there malice. It was a simple fact to her. "You need just one member of your team to be a little selfish, and your project gets turned upside down. Just one to fall ill, and everything grinds to a halt. Can you really tell me yours is the correct attitude to have?"

"Amachi-san. Are you making light of my creators' abilities?"

"That isn't what I'm saying. I'm just against those who believe themselves overly talented, while rejecting those whose abilities are more average. Does explaining things in that way change your impression, Akiteru-kun?"

I couldn't outright answer yes or no. I could feel something trembling deep within me. Like the discs of my heart were slipping. There was no foundation inside me. Nothing strong enough that would allow me to hold my head high and declare that what I knew was right or wrong.

"It is my belief that a hundred average human beings can do more than a single, talented creator. I have always made my decisions based upon that unwavering belief. I also believe that the time will come when you are forced to understand my way of thinking." She spoke softly, gently, like a mother. Her words themselves were filled with affection.

Perhaps I *had* misunderstood Amachi Otoha. I had never wanted to understand where she was coming from, with her opinion that a creator's talent wasn't important. If her goals were to manage her team and IPs to reliably make people happy over a long period of time, then perhaps that way of thinking *was* correct.

I was wrong. My faulty values put Murasaki Shikibu-sensei in danger. If I'd led my team like Tenchido led theirs—if I'd implemented the same policies as Amachi Otoha-san, I wouldn't have gone into a panic, trying to think up a solution when disaster struck. I'd been running my team so horribly inefficiently.

Should I change my methods?

I thought about it.

My thoughts galloped on ahead—before coming to an abrupt stop. I felt something, something tiny, sparking in a corner of my heart. An indescribable, unpleasant feeling. There was no logic behind it. It was an instinct—an emotion.

"Looks like I've won, Senpai."

I heard Amachi-san speaking those words, using Iroha's voice, in my head. She didn't *actually* say anything, but her impression had been so good before, that the victorious smile I pictured seemed

almost too real.

Then I pictured Iroha's face. I recalled my original feelings. I realized then—this wasn't about management strategy at all. There was a much bigger reason that I couldn't abide by Amachi Otoha-san's ideas.

"Iroha."

"Hm? Do you have something to say about my daughter?"

"Are you trying to instill your values in Iroha as an act of kindness?"

This time it was Otoha-san who couldn't give me a clear answer.

I could more or less figure out the meaning behind her silence. Our convictions differed, but we both shared the same goal of creating a product, and making full use of logic and efficiency to do so. My counterattack had inconvenienced her, and now she was trying to piece together a logical comeback as fast as possible.

A moment later, a smile formed on her lips. "So that's your angle of attack, is it?"

"You've forbidden Iroha from coming in contact with any form of entertainment. No matter your management philosophies, I don't see how you can justify restricting a young girl's freedom like that."

"Now, what has this got to do with you, Akiteru-kun?"

"It has—"

Everything to do with me. I barely managed to cut myself off. I deserved a pat on the back for that one. If I *had* let that out, there'd be a risk that Otoha-san would have cottoned on to Iroha's voice acting activities. She was perceptive. She may have already known. But there was a world of difference between her sensing something, and having actual solid proof of it.

In this country, you were innocent until proven guilty. The best thing you could do to protect yourself was to keep the waters muddy.

Clatter...

The tiniest of noises from the balcony on the other side had us both flicking our gazes in the same direction to find out what it was. It came from the balcony of Mashiro's apartment, where both she and Mizuki-san were staying.

I waited, my senses alert to see if anyone was there. But there was no sign of anyone calling out to us, and I couldn't even hear any breathing. Now that I was paying attention, I noticed that the cool fall wind had picked up. Was that the source of the noise?

"Tee hee. They do say the walls have ears, don't they? I wonder if that might be the gods, telling us it's time to bring this conversation to an end."

"Could be."

"Akiteru-kun. I recommend you think nice and hard about what

I've told you tonight." With that, Otoha-san vanished. I heard the window clattering as she opened it and retreated back into her apartment.

With the peculiar pressure she exerted on me lifted, I felt the tension drain from my shoulders, and my lips let loose a sigh.

"A hundred average human beings can do more than a single, talented creator..."

I repeated her words to myself. I had a choice to make, to take us further.

That choice would push us past three million downloads for a guaranteed spot at Honeyplace Works.

"You come all this way, only to yield and start changing up your convictions. That isn't very protagonist of you."

"I'm not good enough to be a main character. A real story would deserve someone cool, like you or Otoha-san—someone who doesn't waver in their beliefs no matter what."

"But this is *your* story, Aki. We wanna know what *you're* gonna do as the main character, whether the role suits you or not."

"I know. But I'm no hero. I wouldn't expect any kind of grand turnabout from me if I were you."

"Don't sweat it, Aki. I don't expect anything like *that*."

"What do you expect, then?"

"I expect you to make the choice that only you can."

Chapter 8: My Fake Girlfriend Won't Give Me a Break

Bzzz!

I woke up with a start that morning, courtesy of the phone buzzing next to my pillow. I brought my hand up to tap my phone and switch off the alarm.

Hm?

The sensation beneath my fingers was all wrong.

My phone was supposed to be smooth and flat. It felt like I was poking something soft.

Bzzz!

On top of that, my phone was still vibrating, with no signs of stopping. My tapping was doing nothing to turn off the alarm. I repeated this action every single day at the exact same time. I was supposed to be all set to follow my perfectly efficient daily routine as usual today, but things were going askew at the very first hurdle.

“Nnn...ngh?!”

I slowly opened my eyes—only to see Mashiro’s face right in front of me. The soft surface I’d been poking was actually her cheek.

Wait.

Wait, what?!

The shock of such an unexpected sight before me catapulted me awake in seconds. What was Mashiro doing here the very second I woke up? This was *my* room! Wasn’t it?

I studied my surroundings. Those were my familiar walls, my familiar ceiling, and my familiar work desk. The only thing not familiar here was Mashiro, asleep.

“What happened? What was I doing right before bed yesterday?!”

I set my brain to full power, doing everything I could to pull back my memories and clear my head of question marks.

Have I made a grave mistake?

I need to think.

What happened?

Picture it. Find Mashiro in your memories.

There she is! In my room, her cheeks red, taking off her clothes—
Wait, that’s not a memory! That’s a delusion! There’s no way that could be real!

I heard Mashiro stir.

“U-Um. Are you awake?”

“What about this, Aki? Is this...a good plan?”

“Plan?”

It was a word I knew even better than my mother’s voice. So wait, I should listen to my mother more? Fine, but my point is that I heard the word “plan” all the time in my work with *Koyagi*.

“Ah.”

I suddenly realized that there *was* something a little different about this place. I usually slept properly on the bed, duvet and all, but for some reason I’d woken up on the floor, *leaning back* against the bed. Mashiro was also kneeling on the floor, her face planted into the sheets. If we *had* gotten up to anything intimate with a round two planned for the morning, we wouldn’t have ended up like this.

Also, the floor around us was littered with printer paper. Mashiro was clutching a pen in her exhausted hand.

I picked up those sheets of paper one by one, each one of them a record of our late-night activities.

“A virtual livestream for our popular characters.”

“Character Popularity Poll”

“Revival Event for Camron, the murderous goat-headed demon.”

“Collaboration with a café like Sweets Festival. ‘Welcome to the Mansion of Darkness’”

And so on.

These were the results of our desperate efforts to come up with something that didn’t need new artwork from Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, but would help us to break through three million downloads. There were various problems with all of them, though, and in the end we were forced to give up.

My memories from last night were clearer now. Mashiro had showed up at my place almost as soon as I was done talking with Otoha-san on the balcony.

“Please, Aki. Let me help you with a plan to reach three million downloads...”

I could sense how guilty she felt even through her LIME message. She was blaming herself for Sumire’s enthusiasm, and I got the impression she felt she needed to do whatever she could to make up for it. If I’d sent her away, that guilt would have consumed her.

I also felt like having some company right around then. I didn’t think I’d be able to focus by myself, knowing my actions had destroyed Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s back.

Laugh at me for being so mentally feeble if you want. I wasn’t like those protagonists you got in fiction with nerves of steel.

There was no point in working Mashiro to exhaustion, so we promised to go to sleep as soon as we got tired, and spent the rest of

the time staying up and working hard to put together a plan for Koyagi.

Bzzzz!

Mashiro mumbled incoherently and yawned. It seemed the phone, still vibrating from its place on the bed, had roused her from her sleep. Her eyes cracked open.

“Mm...Aki... Good...morning... Mmgh...”

“Morning.”

“What a lovely day. I... Huh?” Her eyes, which had been on the verge of closing again, flew open wide at once. She sprang up like a coiled spring, touching her clothes, hair, and face over and over, like she hadn’t been fast asleep just seconds earlier. “Waah... I was sleeping and... I really let Aki see me like this? No way...”

“Don’t worry about it. You didn’t sleeptalk or anything. You were pretty peaceful too.”

“Sh-Shut up. I don’t care about that.”

“What’s the problem then?”

“I-It’s *embarrassing*. I’ve got bed hair, and my makeup’s all messed up. I probably look dumb when I’m sleeping too.”

“You looked cute, actually.”

“Cu—” Mashiro’s pale face steadily turned redder before me.

I realized what I’d just said. “Wait, I didn’t mean that!”

“Y-You didn’t? So I *do* look dumb when I’m asleep? How can you even say that?!”

“No, no, no, you don’t look dumb either! When I said ‘I didn’t mean that,’ I didn’t mean *that*!”

What a pointlessly nitpicky exchange. Language was so tricky. Just a single careless slip of the tongue could lead to a total misunderstanding. Especially when you were talking to someone you knew had feelings for you.

Mashiro’s dad, Tsukinomori-san, had demonstrated how crappy things could get when you *weren’t* careful about positive remarks to someone who you couldn’t get any closer to, for various reasons. But it wasn’t like I could just take it back and say “yeah, your face looked dumb” either.

It felt like I was being pressed for an answer when there wasn’t one—though I guess that was just an excuse. In truth, it was my fault: I just didn’t have enough experience with the opposite sex to know what to say at a time like this.

“Hmph!”

“I-I’m sorry, Mashiro. It’s my fault. Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m going home.”

“O-Okay. Home as in, right next door, yeah?”

“As if that matters! You’re such an idiot!” Mashiro cried, storming

away. She kept her face low as she went, but I could still see it was red.

She wasn't even out the bedroom door before it flew open.

"Senpai! You've been so blue lately that I've come bright and early to put a smile back on— Gah?!"

Mashiro slid right past Iroha, fleeing faster than the metal monster from the JRPG series that practically gave birth to the genre. Iroha's energy was drained from her in a split second, and for a while she stood at my door, frozen with shock...until eventually she turned to me, her eyes accusing and suspicious.

"Did you *do it*?"

"No. Swear to God."

This probably wasn't a good time to point out I wasn't religious.

"I get it. So you and Mashiro-senpei spent the whole night coming up with ideas together."

"Yeah. So you can get rid of any inappropriate ideas in your head right now."

"I dunno, I think a girl and guy staying over in private, working the whole night through, then falling asleep together is kinda inappropriate enough as it is."

It was a Saturday, and the atmosphere around my dining table was as relaxed as it should be on a weekend morning. I had my energy jelly and, because I felt like it, a banana. Iroha was also chewing on a banana, a little sulkily.

She was taking advantage of how we sat across from each other, and was kicking my shins under the table. There wasn't much power behind her kicks; it felt like little more than the swipe of a cat's paw, but it was relentless—*that* was what made it annoying.

"By your definition of 'inappropriate,' I'd have made it to third base with Murasaki Shikibu-sensei already."

"When she pulled an all-nighter to finish some art, you barged into her place near the end and watched her like a hawk till she was done, right?"

"I sure did. Though I know that was wrong of me." I could hear my tone falter. It was because I'd always pushed Murasaki Shikibu-sensei so hard that she became bedbound. There was no justifying my treatment of her anymore.

"Aww... You're really beating yourself up about that, aren't you, Senpai?"

"Of course I am. You hear these stories about creators collapsing because they haven't been taking care of their health, right? When that teacher told me they couldn't get in contact with her, I

thought...that had happened.”

“No one in the Alliance lives that healthily, y’know. Isn’t that why you’re always looking out for information on health?”

“I’ve always done that for myself. The benefit for the Alliance is secondary.”

“You’re always stocking your fridge with nutritious and delicious tomato juice, you do all this research on pressure points...and ’cause you follow your own advice, it’s even more persuasive for everyone else.”

“I’m not gonna give advice I wouldn’t follow myself.”

“I think that’s more than enough consideration you’re giving us, Senpai. Even if it’s not enough to stop one of us getting sick. And, y’know...” Iroha stopped kicking my legs, and instead rested her heels on my lap. “I think Sumire-chan-sensei’s actually pretty happy.”

“Happy?”

“You decided that you wouldn’t let anyone’s artwork into *Koyagi* except hers. I’m pretty sure that’s why she suddenly got so hyped to draw again.”

“And that’s how she messed up her back. You can’t talk like it’s a good thing.”

“Okay, so how d’you think she’d feel if you went ahead and did a ton of stuff without her?”

“I...dunno. I’d have to ask her.”

“I know, though!” Iroha grinned and pointed at herself. “I’m a genius actor, remember? I needed to make sure I understood *all* of Sumire-chan-sensei when I acted as her.”

“I know you’re good at copying personalities, but it’s always gonna be through a filter of *you*, right?”

“How did you know?!”

One slightly probing question, and she backed down immediately. I may have been more of a foolish man than a wise one, but I wasn’t quite *that* dumb. Iroha was definitely talented, but she still had her own characteristics, upbringing, and sensitivities that would influence her performance, no matter how subtly.

On the flip side, the more similarities she had with her role, the more she got into it, and the harder it was for her to snap out of it and return to being herself.

“So I might not have a *perfect* idea of how she’d feel, but I still figure I can give you a pretty accurate answer.”

I paused. “Go on, then.”

How *would* Murasaki Shikibu-sensei feel, if we went for and surpassed three million downloads without relying on her work at all?

“I think she’d feel lonely—like we’d left her behind.”

“Lonely?”

“She’d understand it *logically*, of course. She was the one who chose to make things hard on herself and juggle two careers at once, so she’d feel like she didn’t have the right to feel lonely or complain. But she’s part of the team that’s turned *Koyagi* into what it is now, and she wants to run with us to the very end. No matter if it kills her. That’s just how girls are.”

“Wait, this is a ‘girl’ thing?”

“Knew you wouldn’t get it. That’s what I get for trying to explain to a dense virgin.”

“You know, I can’t really argue with you there.” I was mad, sure, enough to want to punch her in the stomach. I think anyone would be. But that didn’t change the fact that what she said was true. “That was a pretty realistic answer, though. Almost like you’ve felt that way yourself.”

“Well...I guess I have.” Iroha fell into thought for a moment before switching to tapping her heels against my lap rhythmically. “I’m kinda sensitive to the idea of getting left behind. The loneliness. Like, I’m your kouhai, y’know?”

“I always thought so...”

I quickly picked up on the meaning behind her murmur. Last year, when I had been a first-year in high school, I started laying the groundwork for our project with Ozu, Makigai Namako-sensei, and Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Iroha was left behind in junior high school.

“Don’t worry about me! I’m super popular!”

She’d smiled at me and encouraged me to move forward without her. I’d recognized that smile, though—it was the one she wore as a mask.

Lately, Iroha was also different. She’d been clinging to me closer, insisting she wouldn’t show anyone but me her annoying side. That side she had presented to me as we danced in front of the bonfire, and the way she seemed to get jealous of Mashiro now and again...

Could that have anything to do with the loneliness she spoke of now?

“Okaaaay, that’s enough awkwardness *this* early in the morning! Let’s cut it out and talk about something else!”

“Sure, okay.”

“Awkwardness, be gone! Let the invisible curse of heaviness that rests upon this world be dispersed! Haaah!”

“What kinda spell is that?” I scoffed a little.

“It’s magic to make something happen that gets rid of the awkwardness! Ever since I played Kokuryuuin Kugetsu-chan, I’ve had a lot of fun making up my own spells.”

I laughed. “Seriously? Listen, I think you’re a great actor, but don’t let your characters influence you to the point of cringe, okay?”

“You dare call your cute little kouhai *cringe*?! You can’t tell me my magic’s not gonna work! Watch something happen right now! Like the doorbell going off or something.” Iroha said rapidly.

Ding-dong.

“See?!”

“That wasn’t magic. That just means someone wants to see me.”

Iroha looked so smug about the minor coincidence that I had to deliver a light karate chop to her head before I got up to check the intercom.

It was pretty early for a visitor. I peered at the monitor. There was a silver-haired beauty standing there: Mizuki-san.

Mashiro had only just gone home. Was her mom here to scold me for letting her daughter stay over all night? It’d make sense. Mashiro was precious to her, *and* at the right age for staying the night to be a problem.

“G-Good morning.” I opened the front door, cautious, and watched Mizuki-san’s face to try and detect her mood.

“Bon morning. It’s a good morning. I’m fine.”

“Y-Yeah. Um, can I help you?”

“It’s important. Boy and girl dating. I want to talk about it.”

I was screwed.

I’d kept my greeting vague on the off chance she wasn’t here for *that*, but her words told me she very much was.

“I take you with me. Come. Okay?” She dangled a set of car keys next to her face.

I could see it now. An interrogation in her car, where nobody—especially not Mashiro—would be able to hear us.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m ready for this. I’ll tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Whether you believe me or not is up to you.”

“Thank vous. Very manly. Thank you, Mr. Samurai.”

“Where are you going with Mashiro-senpai’s mom, Senpai?” Iroha scuttled up behind me. She must have been worried that I was going to disappear and leave her here all alone.

Mizuki-san caught sight of her and smiled sweetly. “Iroha-chan. Bon morning. You are very cute very early. It makes my eyes happy.”

“Aha ha ha! Aw, quit it! *You’re* the stunning Broadway actress here!” Iroha had taken on just a touch of her honor student tones, but she hadn’t overdone it. As a result, her response was flawless. This was Iroha on her best behavior.

Mizuki-san reached out for my arm and pulled me towards her before shooting Iroha a wink. “I borrow this senpai. We go to talk about important things.”

“Huh? Oh, um. Of course, go ahead. But please bring him back when you’re finished.”

“I’m a person, not a condiment your neighbor’s run out of.”

And why was Iroha acting as if I *belonged* to her?

I didn’t have time to voice my (very reasonable, if I do say so myself) complaints before Mizuki-san started dragging me away.

I prepared myself for the possibility I might not make it out of this alive.

You could tell this French car came from a country devoted to the arts; its tires gave a very smooth ride indeed, and every part of its design had been developed with meticulous care. Whether down to the driver or the car itself, the vehicle barely bumped as we progressed, making for a comfortable journey.

At least, it would have been for the average person.

I was currently experiencing a vision of hell.

The seat belts wrapped around me as I sat in the passenger seat felt like solid chains. I glanced at the driver’s seat to see a French beauty who looked much like Mashiro, only with a more powerful allure, her slender fingers curled around the steering wheel. The ornaments that decorated the car interior were very tasteful, and the sound system was playing classical music. The whole car smelled so *good*, it felt like my brain was going to start leaking out of my ears, but I had no idea where that scent was coming from.

I was in an enclosed space with a beautiful woman, and it was just the two of us. Any other man would probably be squirming with jealousy—but only because they didn’t know the unfortunate reality of the situation.

Minutes had passed since Mizuki-san started driving, and my entire body was tense to the point of frozen as I waited for her to just get on with it and talk.

“Akiteru-kun. I know about last night.”

“I’m truly, truly sorry!” Before she could say anything else, I countered with a swift apology. I’d be on all fours with my forehead glued to the ground if it weren’t for this seatbelt, but believe me when I say I was very much there in my head.

Mizuki-san pulled up to a red light and looked my way. “Why an apology? I don’t understand. There’s no explanation.” She inclined her head, and blinked three times in quick succession.

“Huh? You *are* talking about the thing with Mashiro, right? Because she stayed over at my place last night?”

“Oh, I know that. I understand that. My daughter is a teenager. I support her. What’s done is done. And it’s lovely.”

“You know?! Oh, and I should probably let you know that nothing was ‘done.’” That was the most important point, and I wanted to

hammer it home.

But if she didn't care, what *was* she here to talk to me about? It had to be something pretty big if she bothered to take me on a car ride for it.

"Um, so when you say 'last night,' what do you mean exactly?"

"Akiteru-kun. With Amachi-san. On the balcony. A tryst. I saw it and heard it."

"Come again?"

I suddenly remembered the noise I'd heard during my conversation with Otoha-san. So it hadn't been the wind, but Mizuki-san!

"Wait, wait, wait. A 'tryst'? It wasn't anything like that!"

"A secret talk with a boy and girl in the late night. That's a tryst. Or is that wrong?"

"It was *just* a conversation."

"A secret talk. So a tryst. Or is that wrong?"

"I don't mean to be rude, but I think you need to look up what a 'tryst' actually is."

"Oh. Japanese is difficult to understand. A Herculean task."

And yet she was using phrases like a "Herculean task." I could count on one hand the number of people I'd ever heard use that term in real life.

The traffic light turned green, and we were on our way once more. The scenery outside the window was starting to become less and less familiar. We were on the highway, and my gut told me we were heading into the suburbs.

"I see, so you heard Otoha-san and me talking last night. What about it?"

"I could not hold back. It was impossible. A young boy. Inexperienced. Doesn't know what he's doing. So I'm an adult, an older role model. I'll deflower you. Teach you."

"I know you probably don't mean it, but you sound wildly inappropriate right now! U-Um, could you please rephrase what you're saying so I'm sure it's not just me?!"

I knew this: she was making hilariously poor word choices without realizing their implications. But it would *really* put me at ease if she explained right this second what she actually meant, so I knew she wasn't planning to cheat on her husband with me.

It didn't help that she was driving farther and farther down a deserted road!

She ignored my plea, eventually parking the car in a space on a road devoid of people or even houses.

"S-So, um, please rephrase, because I don't want there to be any misunderstandings between us..." I squirmed in the passenger seat.

Mizuki-san simply held a finger up in front of my face, urging me to be quiet with a hush. “I show you a secret. I get ready. But looking while I’m getting ready is pervy. It is a problem. So make your eyes dark.”

“Perv— H-Hold on a second, please! You’re joking, right? You could get in real trouble for this!”

She ignored my protests, and slipped an eye mask over my head. She left my hands free, so I immediately tried to pull it off again.

“If you take it off, I will be immodest. You will see my underwear, or no clothes. Do you still want to see?”

And then my only choice was to shut up and wait in darkness.

Why did it have to come to this? I only got in the car with her because I thought she wanted to scold me about the thing with Mashiro. I couldn’t think of a worse outcome for this situation than Mizuki-san trying to get it on with me. I’d be betraying Iroha, Mashiro, Tsukinomori-san...and that was just the start of it. The Alliance’s future would be closed off forever.

I thought about keeping my eyes closed, pulling off the mask, and jumping out of the car.

Clothes rustled behind me in the darkness. She was obviously taking something off—clothes, or whatever else. The image of Mizuki-san’s body appeared behind my eyelids, even though I knew it was wrong. Her face, so like Mashiro’s in its beauty, smiled at me seductively, and she flaunted every inch of her pale, flawless skin as she wrapped it around me.

No, no, no, a million times no! It was already bad enough that the image entered my head in the first place!

I needed to get out of here.

My mind made up, I undid my seat belt and pulled off the eye mask. Squeezing my eyes shut, I opened the door, and flung myself outside.

“Eek!”

“Guh!”

Somebody had been standing in front of the door. My body collided with theirs. I was pushed back onto the passenger seat.

Was it Mizuki-san? When did she have the time to come around to my door?

I opened my eyes. A sudden light intruded on the darkness, and my vision flashed white in front of me. As my eyes got used to the light, I started to make out the blurry face in front of me. Obviously it was Mizuki-san.

It *should* have been Mizuki-san.

Except it wasn’t.

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but stare blankly.

It *wasn't* Tsukinomori Mizuki-san, the French beauty who looked like an older version of Mashiro. It wasn't someone I knew all that well either.

“Huh? Wh-What...What are you doing here? *What?!?*”

But neither was it a stranger.

Honestly, I was impressed that I recognized this face at all. I doubted anyone who had been following my life would be able to recall her face accurately either. That was how fleeting—how meaningless—our encounters had been.

I remembered her precisely *because* of how seriously I took my meetings with Tsukinomori-san, and how impactful they could be.

“That will be one Italian hamburger steak meal. Would you like anything else with that?” She held a perfectly straight posture, and there was an earnest glint in her eye. I knew that aproned uniform; I'd heard that voice at the family restaurant near my place.

The first thought that came to my muddled mind: *oh, crap*.

This was the same waitress Tsukinomori-san had hit on and cheated on his wife with. If Mizuki-san found her here, all hell would break loose. I twisted around to look in the car—but Mizuki-san was nowhere to be seen.

Hold up. We were in the middle of nowhere; it didn't make sense for this waitress to just show up out of the blue. It was still a little dark, so I couldn't see properly, but this waitress seemed a little...different from how I remembered her.

Could she maybe be...? But that couldn't be right...

“Is that you...Mizuki-san?”

“Tsukinomori Mizuki. Musical actress and part-time waitress at a family restaurant. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Mizuki-san (waitress version) gave her formal greeting in perfectly fluent Japanese.

But then she giggled, and returned to the (real) Mizuki-san I knew. Her expression softened into something I was much more familiar with. “I am a perfect actress. Did I get one hundred?” She pulled off her wig and removed her contact lenses, revealing her pretty blue eyes. The sleek, silver-blond hair falling down her back was definitely hers.

Now I got it.

The waitress who had fallen for Tsukinomori-san's smooth talk, enjoyed a fancy dinner with him in a high-rise hotel at night, flirted with him to her heart's content, and then (I was assuming) went to the furthest point it was possible to go with him, all behind his wife's back...



“Tsukinomori-san’s...um... It was you?”

“Yes! I’m Makoto-san’s wife. And his mistress. I’m both.”

“Right...”

I was equal parts shocked and relieved. I’d already mostly resigned myself to the fact that my uncle, CEO of a major company, was also the most cheatingest scumbag known to man. But if it was just a game he and his wife liked to play, I’d almost go so far as to call it “cute.”

“Wow. I guess Tsukinomori-san isn’t the cheater I thought he was.”

“Oh. But he is.”

“Huh? Wait, but he’s cheating on you with *you*.”

“Oui. But he doesn’t know it’s me. He’s loving this person he thinks is different.”

“Wh-What?” This whole thing was only making less and less sense.

“Makoto-san is cheating on me a lot before this. But always with me. In a disguise.”

This was all way too much for my mind to process.

My uncle had cheated a lot before—he really was a shameless scumbag—but each time, his mistress was his own wife? Talk about information overload. How was a nephew supposed to react in a situation like this?

“That woman is beautiful. She steals a show.”

“Yeah, I gotta admit that she does.”

“First I was jealous. I *am* his wife. But he looks at other women. I thought it was wrong.”

“Never mind ‘was.’ It *is* wrong.”

“But I love Makoto-san. I have love. I don’t want him trapped. I don’t want to say, ‘don’t look at beautiful women.’ It gives us stress. That’s bad.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s fine for a wife to say that...”

“Yes. But I didn’t want to. He lives carefree, and I love him. I want him to be free and have fun. But I don’t want him to really cheat. That makes me angry. I will kill him.”

“I’m gonna take that last part as a *desire* to kill him instead of a declaration. Okay?” Otherwise, I wouldn’t feel safe spending any more time with this woman.

“So I will be his mistress every time. That is my idea.”

“That’s a pretty massive scheme...”

“When I work in America, they do special Hollywood makeup for me. When I’m in a disguise, I tell Makoto-san a fake time for coming home, then I come home earlier. I see where he is going on GPS, then

go there first and meet him.”

“Do you really have to go out of your way to get movie-grade makeup put on? And doesn’t the change in your face cause problems at immigration?”

“I know the way to sneak past it. There is nothing to worry about. No?”

“That sounds like there’s a ton to worry about, but I’m too scared to ask any more questions, so I’m just gonna pretend I never heard anything.” I was wary about getting too involved in the darkness that surrounded the upper echelons of society. “Wait. ‘Special Hollywood makeup’?”

A face suddenly popped into my head—someone I knew who was all about the make-up world. Not that it had anything to do with the current conversation.

“He can cheat like he wants. He loves me then, and isn’t cheating. So we are both happy.” Mizuki-san flushed, her tone turning wistful. She looked more like a teenager with a crush than a mother of two.

She giggled. “Makoto-san always picks a lady who looks like me to flirt with. Naturally. He always picks me. It makes me very happy and is good.”

“Is that right?” I knew it was rude, but I found myself cringing a bit. Their relationship seemed a bit twisted by adult standards, but how would I know? I had zero experience, and was a long way off being a grown-up myself. Or maybe Mizuki-san was just weird.

I mean...I kind of already established that. Also, she totally had Tsukinomori-san wrapped around her little finger from the sounds of it.

Mizuki-san laughed. “You are very honest, Akiteru-kun. What Makoto-san thinks and what he does is awful. Not normal. Do you think it’s not normal?”

“Um, I... Yeah. Sorry.”

“It is okay. I know this too. Normal couples don’t do these things.”

I doubt they could pull it off even if they tried. The list of prerequisites was long: makeup able to conceal your identity, acting skills enough to perfectly mimic somebody else, top-tier stalking abilities, and a weird taste in men to start with.

“But now I am proud of our relationship. He can do what he wants, and my feelings do not hurt either. He is selfish. But I am proud I can make this work.”

“I have to admit, it *is* impressive.”

When one partner insisted on doing things their way at the expense of the other, over time that attitude would lead to a breakdown in the relationship, and then divorce. So many marriages ended this way, yet here Mizuki-san was succeeding in keeping both

her *and* her husband happy.

You could argue that meant she was doing things right.

“But why are you telling me this all of a sudden?”

“That’s what I want to talk about. This is the important talk now.”

She’d already overloaded me with so much information and was only getting to the important part *now*?!

“There are lots of things in the world that don’t make sense. Ideas and values that go against each other. Like the two ideas ‘I want to see lots of women’ and ‘I want my husband to see only me.’ But it was possible to have both. People must be selfish. It’s important.”

“You put me through all this stress just to tell me I can be selfish?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them—but you have to agree this whole thing was *really weird*.

“Yes. I heard you talk to Otoha-san on the balcony. You have decisions for the Alliance. For where it goes. I want to help.”

“I’m sorry. The Alliance is my problem. I don’t mean to make it everyone else’s.”

“Non. It’s more people’s problem.” Mizuki-san wagged a finger at me and smiled mischievously. “Mashiro and Iroha-chan. They are cute. I love them. They love you. I help you fix your work problems, so you can be drowning in loving them.”

“Do you ever think about anything other than love?”

Mizuki-san giggled. “Actresses have to have pure girl hearts. They are always thinking about love.”

I laughed, nervous.

Mizuki-san’s eyes turned serious as she looked back at me.

“Akiteru-kun. You do what you really want. And what your heart says. Don’t make yourself do the things you don’t want.”

“What I really want...”

There was a lot I needed to think about after what happened to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, and there was a lot I needed to do going forward. Did I *want* to keep managing the team, long into the future? If so, did that mean I would need to add more members, or outsource work, to keep it running efficiently? Or did I want to carry on as we were, with the same members, and take this as far as we could?

I already knew the answer to that—and I always had.

“Thank you, Mizuki-san. I feel more confident now.”

“Hee hee. Yes, it is good.”

I had worried nonstop over these past few days. I’d worried about hitting those numbers, and the restraints we were up against, and I’d failed to come up with any sort of solution. I even made Murasaki Shikibu-sensei suffer because of it.

“...you’ve finally realized how paper-thin your strategy of relying on a teensy group of talent is.”

Otoha-san's words clung to the recesses of my mind like a curse. Those words made perfect sense. But I didn't want to listen to her perfect logic. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted to keep working with my "teensy group." I also wanted to make sure they were safe and healthy.

Those desires contradicted each other, and it was selfish to expect them to align. Our chances of success may have been low, and we may be walking right into disaster.

But I wanted to keep going anyway.

This was my decision. This was my next move. My fists clenched as the resolve in my heart hardened.

Anyway. Tsukinomori-san and Mizuki-san sure had some weird ideas about what a relationship should be. And Mashiro was their daughter—what if she was taking advantage of my innocence and stewing up devious plots just like her mother?

The thought made me shudder.

"Does this mean you're gonna grow up to be a cheater too, Aki?"

"No."

Chapter 9: I'm Making a Choice for Koyagi's Users

"Senpai, Senpai, Senpai! Hey, Senpai! What the hell is this?!"

"Hey, Iroha."

The next day was a Sunday. I was not in my bedroom that morning—instead, I was in the living room, calmly greeting Iroha after she burst through my door with almost enough force to knock it from its hinges.

"Thanks for coming."

"Whaddya mean, 'thanks'?! For rushing over? Are you *insane*?! Of course I'd come the second I got your LIME message!" Iroha shouted, showing me her phone screen and the message I had just sent her.

"*I want you to see me get destroyed.*"

It was a simple supplication, and I'd attached a picture of me in my white robe (well, my white dressing gown—close enough) kneeling on the floor and ready to accept my fate.

These were the robes I would be buried in. Some people said samurai wore robes like this when they were about to commit seppuku. Others didn't.

Incidentally, that photo was something I'd only just taken. I was still dressed like that. And I was still kneeling in the middle of my living room.

I held the knife in my hand, ready to do the deed.

Sorry, I meant my smartphone.

Then, there was the sword for my beheading.

Sorry, I meant a squeaky hammer toy.

"What are you doing?! Are you trying to kill yourself?!"

"Close enough. When I'm done struggling, I want you to deal the final blow, Iroha."

"No way!" Iroha's face was pale as I half forced the squeaky toy into her grip.

The preparations were complete. Now I just needed the rest of the people I'd summoned to show up.

"A-Aki, what was with that message? Are you okay?"

"Hi, Mashiro. Thanks for coming. Sorry to bother you so suddenly on a weekend."

"Y-You're not *bothering* me... Wait, are you trying to die?"

"Close enough."

“Wh-What do we do, Iroha-chan? Aki’s gone crazy!”

“No, I haven’t. There’s no need to be rude.”

“No, Senpai, if you don’t realize it yourself, that makes it even worse! You gotta accept that Mashiro-senpai and I are right for once!”

“Y-Yeah. What’s the matter, Aki?” Mashiro looked frightened about what I might be about to do.

Don’t worry, Mashiro. I’m just as terrified as you are.

“You sure think up the funniest stuff, Aki. Can’t wait to see how this’ll end.”

“Hey, Ozu. Looks like everyone I need is here.”

I had contacted Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and Makigai Namako-sensei too, but I knew it’d be extremely difficult for either of them to come, so I had been very clear that they shouldn’t force themselves—so this was everyone.

“How can you be so calm when Senpai’s in such a state, Ozuma?! Are you some kinda savage? I can’t believe you’re *smiling!*”

“Aha ha ha. I got spoiled for this whole thing. That’s why I’m way calmer than you and Tsukinomori-san.”

“Ozu—I mean, Kohinata-kun—do you mean you know what Aki’s about to do? If you’re smiling, that means it’s nothing bad. Right?”

“Not really. It’s *risky*, definitely, but he’ll live. For now.”

“Though it does *feel* like I’m about to die.”

“What are you talking about, Senpai?”

“Just...don’t do anything hasty, okay?”

My added comment just made Iroha and Mashiro look even more confused than they did before.

I guess I’ll get started. There’s no point agitating them more.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. I’ve made an important decision that concerns the future of the 05th Floor Alliance and *Koyagi*.”

“An important decision? Um, are you sure Mashiro-senpai and I need to be here for this?”

Iroha asked a question that reminded everyone that she wasn’t (supposed to be) in the Alliance. As far as they were concerned, she had no direct involvement in our projects—she was just a neighbor on the same floor.

Mashiro, meanwhile, wasn’t an Alliance member, neither secretly nor openly. She was my fake girlfriend, tied to me by a contract I made with the CEO of Honeyplace Works.

I wasn’t about to get nitpicky over this, though.

“Iroha, you helped us come up with Kokuryuuin Kugetsu, and Mashiro, you helped me come up with ideas to reach three million downloads. As far as I’m concerned, you’re both Alliance members already.”

“Aki... So what’s this important decision?”

“I started up the Alliance and put in everything I had alongside you guys, to make it to where we are today. We made it to two million downloads together, and now we’re looking forward to the next million. I’m so grateful to you all. This was something I never could have achieved by myself, as a teenager with average abilities.”

I meant it too—*Koyagi* would have been impossible on my own. That was the truth, no matter how much my Alliance mates tried to talk me up. I wasn’t being modest either. I was proud that I was able to support their activities and give them a place they could shine.

But my job also came with major responsibilities.

“You’ve all continued to work hard and go above and beyond, but that’s had some less visible effects too. Your freedom, your time, your health... Your efforts have been chipping away at all of those important things, little by little.”

I’d always aimed for the best—the most efficient—path towards our major goal, and I had done that by relying on my teammates’ high motivation. It was just so easy to do...

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s back problems are no coincidence. It was something that was bound to happen, as long as we stuck to the path we were on.”

Our game was developed by a stable team of a select few. It was no different to a house of cards, ready to collapse at the first sign of trouble. My ideology was contradictory, something that shouldn’t be possible to maintain.

There was a choice. I could find myself a team of a few tens—or even hundreds—of staff, where if one of my creators fell ill, another could just take their place, like a well-tuned machine.

Or I could keep on going with my tiny team, who understood one another, and guarantee quality—even if that meant slowing down output when things went wrong.

Only one of those options would give us a future.

Tenchido was a major company, whose organizational stability was a result of the values it had built up through industry experience. Compared to me, who had only started developing games a year ago, its judgment was a hundred times more correct, a thousand times more logical, and ten thousand times more efficient.

“So I’ve made a decision. Using my own judgment—and based on what *I* want.” I gripped my phone tight in my hand. Then I sent that notification to every one of our users.

Iroha, Mashiro, and Ozu’s phones all vibrated at the same time. I knew that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s and Makigai Namako-sensei’s phones would be too—as would every phone out there with *Koyagi* installed on it.

This was the message that would appear on their screens:

Important Announcement:

To all of our supportive users,

The Koyagi team will be taking a temporary break from adding new content. We understand you are all eager to see us add new scenarios and characters, and the development team is also eager to update the game. However, we have judged that, were we to continue at our current pace, it would be difficult to deliver the quality we know you expect from us.

We are aiming to resume updates in December, to give the new content the full attention they deserve, and to hold them to the high standards you expect.

We deeply apologize for any worry we may have caused you, and hope you will continue to support Koyagi: When They Cry and the 05th Floor Alliance in the future.

05th Floor Alliance Member AKI

“Wh-Whoa... I did it... Ha ha ha! I actually *did* it!”

“Uh, Senpai? You totally look like a serial killer after his first victim!”

“Ha ha ha! Aaargh! My stomach hurts so bad! Irohaaa! The beheading!”

“I have no clue what you mean by that, but I’ll do it anyway! Prepare yourself!”

As I stabbed my phone into my stomach and writhed in pain, Iroha brought the toy hammer down on my head, letting its pathetic squeak ring out for all to hear. It wasn’t enough to send me peacefully off to heaven, but the soft bash against my head and the stupid noise it made relaxed me just a little bit.

It was completely between my ears, of course.

“A-Are you serious about this, Aki?” Mashiro asked.

“If I weren’t, do you really think I’d send this notification out?”

“Right, you sent this to all your users... But are you really sure about stopping updates, considering the way the mobile game market is these days?”

“I know it’s practically suicidal. Why d’you think my stomach hurts this bad?” I groaned.

Mashiro was an aspiring author. That must have been why she understood how much damage this could do.

The world was awash with all kinds of entertainment. Those who couldn’t keep up were left behind to drown in the swamp and disappear. I knew this because I had seen it for myself time and again. I wasn’t naive enough to think that *Koyagi* was special enough to avoid that fate.

My stomach really hurts...

I was scared to check our social media. I didn't know what I'd do if I saw a ton of angry comments.

Squeak, squeak.

"Any time you wanna stop hitting me is fine."

"I'm just making a hundred percent sure that I'm dealing the final blow like you asked."

"You're doing a bang-up job."

"Anyway, can you explain, please? What's the deal with this announcement?"

I was cowering on the floor, and now Iroha had to stoop down to keep hitting me with the hammer.

"It's because of what you said."

"Huh? Me?" Iroha stared. She clearly didn't have a clue about what I was referring to.

"Yeah. I was working too hard."

"Well, duh. I mean, you always have."

"I know, but I feel like it's about time I changed my ways." My main aim with *Koyagi* was to borrow my team's talents, and showcase them to the world. In other words, it was pure selfishness. "I've made it this far because what I wanted and what you guys wanted was one and the same. That's why I pushed myself so hard to reward your efforts—but that was where the pitfall lay."

"What pitfall?"

"As long as I kept pushing myself, everyone else pushed themselves endless too. Which would've been great if nothing happened, but in all honesty it was a bomb waiting to go off. That was why I've decided not to race for three million downloads, and instead give everyone a break."

Just holding off on asking for illustrations wasn't enough; the other Alliance members were too kind for that. As long as they knew how hard I was working, they would want to do whatever they could to assist me. No one would get any rest unless the entire team stopped working.

"I could have hired more people and aimed for a more stable, efficient process. There would have been absolutely nothing wrong with that. It's just..."

There was no *point*.

I wanted *Koyagi* to be ours, forever and ever. I didn't care what the "right" thing to do was. This was *my* decision.

"I've chosen to continue with the team we have now. That holds true whether we're rushing ahead, or taking a breather."

Iroha, Mashiro, and Ozu looked at me. I couldn't identify the emotions that created those expressions—but I wouldn't be surprised if the dominant feeling was confusion. I had sprung this on them

pretty suddenly.

"I'm sorry for making such a major decision without talking to anyone first. I just thought this was something I needed to take responsibility for. As is my right as leader, I won't hear any objections."

"Sure. Like I said when I did the settings for the notification, I'm happy to leave all the decision-making to you. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and Makigai Namako-sensei have also given their approval." Ozu smiled and showed me his phone screen.

"I think you did the right thing too, Aki. You always make the right choice." Mashiro, who for some reason had turned her back to us for a split second, hurriedly turned around and nodded.

"Why'd you pick December as the month to start up again?" Iroha asked.

"The class trip is in the second half of October. Sumire-sensei's workload probably won't go down till after then. We've got the whole of November to prepare as much as possible, so December is probably the fastest we can get another update out."

"Okay. So does that mean there's no work to do at all till November?"

"That's right."

There was a hopeful edge to Iroha's voice, as though she were looking forward to the break—which was bad, because this technically wasn't supposed to affect her. Mashiro seemed too preoccupied to pick up on it.

"I'm gonna make sure I get the most out of the class trip too, just like teenagers are supposed to."

"That might actually benefit the Alliance going forward," Ozu pointed out.

I had the same thought. Looking back, I'd been so wrapped up in work every single day, I never had any time to focus on my private life. Well, I was still confident that I had managed to make good use of the lessons I learned at important turning points in my private life to benefit the Alliance.

Of course, I never forgot what the end goal of all this was, and tried not to let myself get carried away, but...

I glanced at Iroha and Mashiro, and thought. Whether I let my feelings rise to the surface or not, it was probably a good idea to evaluate them and identify where exactly they were at.

"You haven't completely given up on growing *Koyagi*, though, right Aki?" Ozu's question interrupted my daunting thought.

"Of course not. This is a strategic retreat, not a random vacation."

"Oh, good. I thought you might've been saying that you don't care about our numbers anymore."

“We don’t need to force our numbers to grow, nor do we need to push ourselves so hard to reach three million downloads.”

“Huh? Wait, what do you mean?”

“It’s silly to think that our game can compete with hits from Honeyplace Works just because we’ve got a lot of downloads.”

“You got that right,” Iroha said.

“We never needed to aim for the numbers. We need to aim for the *depth* of those numbers—so that even if we can’t win by numbers alone, we have plenty of fans who truly love *Koyagi*. And we can study how many devoted fans like that we have. That’ll be our true win condition.”

“Huh? How would you study that?” Iroha asked.

“I’ve got an idea, but I’ll explain later. First, I want to see what our users are gonna say about today’s announcement.”

I put everything I had into it. If our users came back with insults, criticism, and hate, then they weren’t the devoted fans we needed. And that was exactly why my stomach hurt.

If we experienced a sudden mass exodus of users because our updates slowed down, then this was the end of the line for the 05th Floor Alliance.

On the other hand, if we had a massive group of users who reacted with acceptance, then it would be clear that we had a devoted fan base.

Which way would it go? It was a gamble with perfectly even odds.

“The users should be reacting by now. You ready for this, Aki?”

“K-Kill me!”

Ozu looked eager to read out the social media posts on the phone in his hand, but my teeth were clenched together.

“You’re like a lady knight, Senpai!”

“I guess I kinda feel like that right now! I’m ready for my mind to take a beating!”

“Well then, here we go. Okay?” A soft, savage smile on his face, Ozu slowly opened his mouth. ““You can’t even get out one update a month? Do you know what market you’re in?!””

“Guargh!”

I felt it right in my solar plexus.

““Guess *Koyagi* is finally dead lol. See you in the next game.”

“Gahaargh!”

That one was a powerful uppercut to my jaw.

““I knew the developers were trash. What a waste of Makigai Namako-sensei’s talent. Leave the man to write his books, assholes.””

“Urgh... That was a low blow...”

A choke hold that cut off my breathing.

“Quit it, Ozuma! Senpai’s gonna die!” Iroha cried.

“Th-These guys are too cruel... Who knew the users were this terrifying?!” Mashiro trembled in the face of our users’ cruelty, her face pale.

Only Ozu remained calm. “You really want me to stop? I’m about to get to the good bit.”

“You *gotta* stop, or we’re in trouble! Senpai’s mind is at its limit!”

“Don’t stop!” I took a deep breath. “It’s my duty to listen to every last one of these comments.”

“Senpai... You can’t...”

“It’s a producer’s job to be the punching bag at a time like this. Keep it up, Ozu.”

“Okay. Here goes.”

“Senpai, no!”

“Aki... You can’t! You gotta stop!”

Iroha’s and Mashiro’s cries did nothing to stop Ozu from carrying on. Every new merciless comment was like another stab directly to my heart. I squeezed my eyes shut, and prepared myself for another blow.

“Guuuys! Okay! I don’t care how long it takes! I know the next update is gonna be great and I can’t wait!”

I paused.

And then I did a double-take.

“I’m gonna miss the updates, but I’m also gonna be right there the second you start up again!”

“I’m gonna lick Kugetsu-chan so hard before December rolls around!”

“You guys update so quickly, I’ve been worried about your health for a while. Please don’t push yourselves, rest well, and make the best game you can!”

“See you guys in December!”

“I’m gonna take the time to replay my favorite scenarios!”

“Thanks for working so hard, guys! I’m gonna buy more premium items to support you!”

“AKI-san! Thanks for all the hard work! I’ll wait as long as it takes! I’m with you guys forever!”

Ozu read out comments, comments, and more comments, one after the other. More than I could write here.

“The first three comments were the only critical ones; most of the rest are all voicing their gratitude towards the devs. Some sound disappointed, but there aren’t that many which are outright negative.”

“What about the silent majority? What if they hate us for this?”

“I wonder about that. We’re not gonna see how many users have left till December rolls around—but we’ve got a lot of likes, and the reaction looks the same as those games with a solid base of core fans. I’ll get an AI to do the proper analysis later, but for now it looks like

the news is being taken well.”

“Right...”

“Isn’t this great, Aki? This just goes to show that the fans have really felt all the hard work the Alliance has put into *Koyagi*.”

“Yeah...”

I’d never been more nervous about an announcement in my life. I was probably a hundred times more nervous than even the time we first released *Koyagi* into the world. It didn’t matter if we messed up then, because no one had ever heard of us. It was nothing ventured, nothing gained. Those forces drove us forward, and there wasn’t a lick of fear involved.

It never even crossed my mind that, at some point, I would be posting a message to say we were slowing down, and that it would be a hundred times more terrifying. I’d heard that the retreat was a tougher test of courage than the advance, but this was the first time I was living those words myself.

“Thank God...” All the tension left my body at once, and I sank to the floor.

“Senpai...”

“Aki...”

Iroha and Mashiro stepped up to me and started stroking my back.

“You did it, Senpai.”

“It’s over now.”

They voiced simple words of thanks. There was nothing overly special about them, but right now they soothed me more than anything else could.

The following week was a strange one. I did no work for *Koyagi* whatsoever. I wasn’t the type to waste that time, though, so I read books, gathered information, looked into Pinstagram, and watched the VTuber streams I hadn’t had time for before. I’d never really spent any time hanging out with Iroha, Mashiro, and Ozu without a reason before, so we enjoyed ourselves doing that. Sumire was able to come back to work at the start of that week, and set about working on the class trip without pushing herself.

Saturday evening rolled around again, and we all gathered in my living room on the fifth floor of our apartment building like always.

“Murasaki Shikibu-sensei is fully recovered, *and* my pre-class trip work has finally settled down! Cheers!” Sumire announced, cheerful, and she raised her glass high in the air.

“Cheers!” Iroha, Mashiro, Ozu, and I joined her in her toast.

I decided not to get on her back about guzzling down vodka the

second she was recovered. We were here to celebrate her hard work, and I didn't want to bring down the mood.

"Aaah, there's nothing like a bit of alcohol after some hard work!"

"You deserve it! Keep gulping it down!" Iroha said.

"You're going too fast. Why not slow down a little?"

"C'mon, Mashiro-senpai, she's fine! This is a *celebration*!"

"Hmph."

"Aha ha ha. Be kind to her tonight, Tsukinomori-san," Ozu said.

"It's thanks to her hard work that our class trip's gonna be way more fun than most years."

"Really?"

Ozu nodded. "Everyone's been talking about it in the student council. Along with the Class Trip Committee, they're breaking tradition and letting us stay in a pretty inn with good food."

"Oh... Then I'll let her off," Mashiro said.

"Sumire-chan-sensei really cares about her students! Thanks to you guys doing all this now, it's gonna be easier for us first-years to stay somewhere good when it's our turn. All this gratitude is gonna get squared!"

"Yeah! Keep praising me, guys! Oho ho ho ho!"

"Okay, I'm not letting you off. You're too noisy. Be quiet." Mashiro said.

"Aww, c'mon, don't be so mean!" Sumire cackled.

I sighed. "They're as loud as ever..." I slipped out from the usual buzzing group, and stepped into the kitchen for some respite.

It warmed me to know they hadn't changed one bit, despite the break we were taking from *Koyagi*—though there was something different about our gathering tonight. Someone else entered the kitchen then, smoothing out her braided hair. She was a new face at our parties.

Otoha-san took a sip from her sake cup, her face tinged red from drunkenness. "It certainly is lively out there. Do you always have such fun?" she said, her tone light.

"Yes. There's nothing shady about it. I'm drinking tomato juice here, see?"

"Tee hee. There's no need to be on guard, sweetie. I trust you." Otoha-san's gaze moved farther into the apartment, across the hallway. "By the way, what is that locked room over there?"

"Just storage. Nothing to worry about."

I lied. It was actually where my fully automatic mahjong table was.

We never bet any money—just our pride and convictions—so it wasn't like anyone could say anything. I just didn't want someone

else's parents to find out about it.

Another new face—another difference to the usual order of things—swayed into the room then. A woman blessed with French beauty.

“A secret room. Mysterious. I am curious. That’s where you do it.”

“Do what? Read dictionaries?”

I couldn’t tell if her Japanese was off, or if she seriously meant that. Please stop, Mizuki-san.

And now I was cornered by two adults. It was awkward, but I also knew it was my fault for allowing this to happen. I was the one who invited them here in the first place.

It was partly a declaration of war against Otoha-san. I wanted to show her how much fun Iroha could have as a part of our group. I myself had reconsidered what I wanted to do with the Alliance, and made a decision that brought it to a turning point.

The next thing I wanted was to come up with a plan to bring Iroha to the next level. Watching VTubers and looking into Pinstagram was a part of that.

If I wanted this to happen, I couldn’t let myself be frightened off by Otoha-san’s watchful eye anymore. I needed to put some pieces—no matter how small—in place now, so that one day I could convince her to grant Iroha her freedom.

Why did I invite Mizuki-san, then?

It’d be kind of weird to invite Otoha-san as the only responsible adult, and rude to leave Mizuki-san out when I’d invited literally everyone else on the floor. More than anything, I wanted to thank her for encouraging me to go down this route, so I was planning on treating her to one of the expensive bottles I saved for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.

But, well, she was a celebrity, so it might have tasted like cheap crap to her.

“You certainly came to a bold decision, Ooboshi-kun.”

“You mean to take a break in updates?”

“Yes. It’s a real shame you didn’t listen to my warning.” As usual, it was difficult to work out from Otoha-san’s expression how genuine she was being, but I did get the feeling that she really *was* disappointed. “One day, when you’re all grown-up, you’ll be ever so upset that you made this decision.”

“You might be right. But...”

Otoha-san was the leader of the huge organization that was Tenchido. Maybe she only wanted to give me some direction as someone more experienced, who led a group of creators just like I did. Her direction, though, was for the path she’d already led. It was a guide on how to navigate the dungeon she’d already beaten.

It was her path, not mine.

“I’m going to die one day, and when I do, I want my spine to remain intact. I don’t want to leave a cobble of bones that never fit my skin.” I gathered up my determination and looked Otoha-san right in the eye, without wavering once. I forced my spirit to hold strong against my friend’s terrifying mom, a leader who had achieved legendary results within our shared industry.

Otoha-san sighed, and it wasn’t until she spoke that I recognized the meaning behind it. “You’re so inexperienced,” she said, disappointed.

“Non. He is not, Madame Tenchido.” Surprisingly, Mizuki-san was the one to step in and defend me. “Experienced and inexperienced are not the right words. It’s if he will give up his dream, or not give up.”

“Tsukinomori-san? Oh, I see. You’ve had a word with him.” Otoha-san’s eyes widened ever so slightly, and Mizuki-san looked right back at her, her eyes as glossy as snow.

A powerful, invisible spark passed between them.

What was with them all of a sudden? Maybe they didn’t get along after all.

“That may be your view of things. You found success by shirking relationships, and following your own selfish desires.” Ignoring my confusion, Otoha-san retaliated, her words sharp with spite.

Mizuki-san merely smiled comfortably, not seeming upset in the least.

Y’know, if I really think about it—these two are like water and fire.

Mizuki-san was a musical actor. Otoha-san abhorred the arts and entertainment, to the extent that she snatched away any means Iroha might have to access it, whether that be via television, smartphone, or streaming service.

Mizuki-san was the very embodiment of everything Otoha-san hated. Of *course* Otoha-san’d dislike her. They had me totally fooled, just because Iroha and Mashiro got along, and when they came to my apartment, they seemed completely fine with each other.

An adult’s ability to play nice was spine-chilling.

Wait, what had Otoha-san just said about relationships? If she was criticizing Mizuki-san for shirking relationships, then did that mean she came this far because she valued them? Which would mean that the values she held right now were different from what they used to be, right?

And if *that* was true, maybe I was on the verge of a breakthrough. Maybe this was my first step in convincing Otoha-san to let her daughter follow her own path in life.

This could be dangerous. I might be about to kick the hornet’s nest here—but even then, it was worth a try!

“About what you just said—”

“Senpai! Help me!”

“Wah! Iroha?!”

Iroha dashed into the kitchen before I could question her mom further. Her face held the haunted look of a human about to get eaten in a zombie movie, and behind her was that zombie, clinging to her back and trying to drag her away. Only it wasn't a zombie, it was Sumire.

“Aww, stop running, Iroha-chaaan! Show me more of that adorable IroMashi!”

“Shipping real-life people is against the rules! Help me, Senpai!”

“Sounds like Shikibu's found a new ship for her collection. I hope you don't mind being buried at sea.”

“Don't give up on me, Senpai! Get over here! Come distract her with some OzuAki!”

“Have you already forgotten what you said literally two seconds ago?”

Something about shipping real people.

“OzuAki is a 2.5D ship, not the full 3D! So it's okay!”

“Take a seat, Shikibu, and let me tell you about the incredible ship that is IroMashi.”

“Yeeeeeaaah! I'm so stoked for this!”

“You *snake*, Senpai!”

I helped Sumire to push a wailing Iroha out of the kitchen, making my own exit at the same time. Turning back, I saw Otoha-san and Mizuki-san wave me goodbye, their faces plastered with unreadable smiles.

Perhaps it was for the best that I didn't get to probe Otoha-san. I didn't know the full extent of these adults' strength, and if I got too close too soon, there was a chance they'd draw their swords and have my head off before I even knew what was happening.

Nice job, Iroha.

Epilogue 1: Iroha and Mizuki

“I’m totally beat...”

I finally broke free from Sumire-chan-sensei, and now I was staggering towards the kitchen. I opened the fridge. Maybe because it was our first party in a while, but she’d been super hyper today. Like, had she only been *pretending* to have back pain a few days ago, or what?

It was nice to see her have so much fun, but it took a lot out of me, and now I was exhausted. Asking a teenage girl like me to keep up with an adult fully loaded on booze—when I wasn’t even drunk myself—was way too much.

I came here to grab a drink. My throat was dry, and I needed to top up my energy levels too.

“Darn, we’re outta drinks.”

The fridge was empty. Senpai always kept plenty of alcohol for Sumire-chan-sensei, but for some reason, he wasn’t as attentive with soft drinks.

I poked my head out of the kitchen. “I’m just gonna rush out and grab some stuff from the store!”

Senpai was the first to hear me. “Want me to come too? It’s kinda late for a girl to go out alone.”

He’s worried about me! Ah, I love him so much!

My insides were exploding, and crazy as I could be, even I wasn’t gonna say what I *really* thought out loud. So I answered like a normal person (a normal person grinning from ear to ear, because I was so happy I couldn’t help it).

“I’ll be fine—the convenience store’s super close. Or were you looking for a romantic late-night walk?” I giggled.

“D-Don’t be stupid. That’s not what I meant. If you’re fine, you’re fine. Thanks.”

“No problem!” I saluted like all good kouhais should.

To tell you the truth, *I* was the one who wanted to go on a romantic late-night walk. But it was way easier to push my desires onto Senpai, and act like what *I* wanted was actually what *he* wanted.

I called out a final greeting to let them know I was going, then put my shoes on at the entrance, which was when I noticed someone was behind me.

“Oh, Mashiro-senpai’s mom! Would you like anything from the

store?”

It was Mizuki-san, the gorgeous Broadway star.

She shook her head. “I come with you. No more drink. It’s gone.”

“You mean alcohol? There’s some left. Quite a lot—it’s Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s stash.”

“I like cheap alcohol from the store. Demon Crush. There is none here. I’ll go to buy.”

Ah. If she wanted alcohol, I couldn’t buy it for her.

It felt kinda weird going shopping with my mom’s friend when I’d only just met her, but I was Kohinata Iroha! I could get anyone to open up with my special magic!

“All right! Then let’s go!”

We headed for the convenience store, which was just about a five minute walk from the apartment building. The two of us walked in silence through the chilly fall air.

That stuff about special magic? Well, the thing is, she hadn’t said anything to me, and so I kind of clammed up too. Sorry!

Usually, I’d be fine starting up a conversation in cheerful honor student mode, but Mizuki-san had a powerful aura, like a courtier or something, and it was crushing me.

Thinking about it, she was a Broadway actress—a woman at the very top of the ladder I wanted to climb. The thought made me nervous, and it felt like my lips were frozen shut.

She was beautiful and looked a lot like Mashiro-senpai. Would Mashiro-senpai look just like this when she was older? Those were the simple thoughts that popped into my head when I looked at the side of her face.

Mizuki-san’s eyes suddenly caught mine.

I flushed with embarrassment at being caught staring, and I hurriedly tried to come up with an excuse.

“Iroha-chan. You are playing all the Alliance characters’ voices. Yes?”

“Huh?!” My voice squeaked. I had not been expecting *that*.

How was it even fair for her to bring *that* up with that out of nowhere?!

Mizuki-san let out a knowing giggle. “I have this connection. I played the *Koyagi* game. I know the voices are all different, but you can’t fool a professional actress like me.”

“Y-You can figure that kinda stuff out just from listening to the voices?”

“Even when you are good at acting, there are instincts. Habits. They are difficult to make vanish. How you breathe, stop for breaths, and moan. It’s easy to tell apart.”

“Um... Moan? Are you sure you’re not thinking of another word?”

“Oh, maybe I need a different word. A flirty voice, or seducing voice, or a sexy voice. You can choose one of those.”

“Eek! Okay, I get it!”

“That’s it.”

“Huh?”

“Where the long part is in the ‘eek.’ How your breath comes out on the ‘ee.’ That’s where the habits are. And the ‘huh’ you said now.”

“You can really tell just from that, huh? Um, do you mind keeping this a secret?”

“Yes, I do not tell anyone. No credits, no one knows who you are. So there is a reason you can’t use your name. Yes?”

“Yeah... My mom...”

“Like I thought.”

“Huh?”

What did she mean by that? I knew she sort of knew mom already, but did this mean she knew about our rules too?

“Akiteru-kun knows this too, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. Senpai’s helping me train as a voice actor in secret.”

“Okay, I understand. You, me, and Akiteru-kun in a secret triangle. I’ll be careful not to tell other people. Don’t worry. I am better at hiding secrets than jumping over the moon.”

“Th-Thank you. Your Japanese is kinda...off, though.”

“If you are understanding the words, it is good communication.”

I guess that made sense. Actually, I was a little jealous that she was able to say whatever she wanted without caring about messing up.

“I’ve still got a long way to go if a professional can figure me out so easily.”

Mizukia-san giggled. “Don’t be sad about this! Hiding skills and acting skills are different.”

I didn’t mean to say that out loud—but she was right. Regular actors didn’t need to work on hiding their identity. Maybe she thought I was weird for letting it bother me so much. It would explain why she was staring at me right now.

Whoa, her eyes were super pretty too. They shone with the mystery of the full moon reflected on an ocean, with enough power to charm even me.

“Yes, I know now. It makes sense.” She laughed.

“Excuse me?”

“I see the talent from the Alliance’s voice actor in you.”

“O-Oh, um... Th-Thank you?”

“You’re welcome. But I feel it is a waste too. You can fix what is missing, to become an even more amazing actor, I thought. And I

thought at first something was strange, but I didn't know from your voice by itself. Now, though, I understand. Surely." Mizuki-san nodded to herself.

Personally, I didn't have a clue what she was on about.

"You are not showing yourself. You try to hide. That is the weak part of your acting."

I gasped.

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. Whenever I recorded for *Koyagi*, even when I got perfectly into character, there was always that tiny voice inside my head: "*What if mom finds out about this?*"

I couldn't believe Mizuki-san had picked up on that, especially when this was our first real talk.

"I have one idea for you." Mizuki-san raised a finger and smirked at me. "Do you want to be my pupil?"

"Wh-What?! Y-Your pupil?! But you're a real-live actress! Um...how much do you charge?"

"I don't need money." She giggled, "I am charmed by your talent. From the first sight."

"U-Um, I-I'm so flattered I don't know what to say!"

"I will teach you to make boys go too. Akiteru-kun is yours in one second."

"Ack. What makes you think I'm crushing on Senpai?"

"I'm wrong? It's true no matter who looks and how. I'm wrong when I say only Akiteru-kun doesn't notice?"

"You're...not wrong. But when you say you'll teach me to make him 'go'? I think you've got the wrong word."

Mizuki-san giggled. "It's a joke. It's cute for you to make it serious. It's nice to be young!"

"Ugh... I guess the only one you had going was me."

She seriously knew how to pile on the pressure! But hey, even if that stuff about Senpai was a joke, maybe this was actually my chance? Opportunities to study under Broadway actresses weren't a dime a dozen, after all. If she could teach me to get over my weaknesses and level up, it'd be really helpful for *Koyagi*. And Senpai too.

Thoughts were unraveling like twine in my head.

"Could I get a few days to think about it?" was all I could get out.

"Of course!" Mizuki-san trilled. "Thinking carefully on big decisions is important. Can you show your phone?"

"Here."

Mizuki-san presented me with her phone screen displaying a QR code. I took my own phone out to scan the code so we could add each other on LIME.

"When you feel like that, always. I will wait on the edge of my

sheet. Oh, here we are.”

We made it to the convenience store at the perfect time, almost as though she'd planned this.

She...*was* here to buy something, right?

Our conversation had been so profound, that I couldn't even remember what she came to the store for anymore.



Epilogue 2: Mashiro and Otoha

“It’s so exhausting having this many people around.” I sighed. “It is kinda fun, though...”

After Iroha-chan and my mom had gone out to shop, I staggered my way out onto the balcony. The night wind was comfortably cool. I loved the night for its stillness. Bathing alone in the light of the moon was enough to restore my MP.

Sumire-sensei was a really rowdy drunk. Her trying to force me and Iroha-chan into some kind of yuri ship was just gross.

Although...it was my fault that she had pushed herself too hard. So I let her say all the stuff she wanted, but even then it was a bit much.

Sumire-sensei wouldn’t admit this herself, but I was sure that this whole mess—of her pushing herself to draw the picture for three million downloads, and working so hard to organize the class trip—was because she was thinking of me.

I didn’t have a single good memory from a class trip. Not from elementary school, and not from junior high school either.

I found it hard to fit in anyway, and when they forced us to take part in a group like that, it only made me feel even more alone. Class trips were *miserable*. The type of event that only normies could enjoy and had nothing to do with me. Class trips could go die in a fire.

If I was ever going to enjoy class trips, it was going to be this one. The one where I could be with Aki and spend time with the people closest to me, like Ozu, Midori-san, and Otoi-san. This was my first and last chance.

I wondered if Sumire-sensei knew what I thought about the whole thing. If that was why she put so much effort in. I knew she wasn’t thinking *only* of me, like I was special or something, but our class as a whole. But I did feel like she did want to do it for me...if only a little bit.

Thank you, Shikibu. But this is the last time I’ll let you use me as an object in your nonfictional yuri fantasies.

“Iroha-chan...”

It was irritating that it came from Shikibu’s fantasies—but the face of my love rival appeared in my mind. Since declaring war on me on the evening of the culture festival, she was my biggest threat. The girl who’d cultivated her relationship with Aki so that she was constantly

by his side.

My chances of winning were low, but I did hold one significant advantage over her. If I could use that to its full potential, then maybe I could grasp victory!

“The class trip. That’s where I gotta take the lead over Iroha-chan,” I murmured to no one in particular, gripping the railings in front of me tightly.

Suddenly, the window behind me rattled open, as though objecting to my determination. I jumped and whirled around to see Iroha’s mom stepping out onto the balcony.

“Oh dear, here you are. Were you running from the drunkard, sweetie?”

“U-Um, I was...just a little warm...”

“I see. Do you mind if I join you?”

“O-Of course not.”

Honestly, I’d be more comfortable by myself, but I didn’t have the social skills to tell that to an adult I barely knew.

Otoha-san stood next to me and looked down at the ground five stories below us. Curious, I followed her gaze, and found Iroha-chan and mom walking along the path. It felt weird, seeing her with my mom, while I was up here with hers.

Weirder than that was Otoha-san’s gaze.

Even the deepest depths of her narrowed eyes didn’t even hint at what she might be thinking. The aura settling around her was making me anxious, though. Maybe it was because of what Aki told me, that her values didn’t match up with his. Maybe I unconsciously saw her in a bad light because of that.

Even apart from that, she was a little scary. Was it her resemblance to Iroha-chan? She wasn’t just scary, after all—she was gorgeous, enough that it was quite easy to get lost in her eyes without meaning to.

“How big is your crush on Akiteru-kun, Mashiro-chan?”

“Wh-Wha—?!” The question came out so casually that my response was delayed. I wasn’t mentally prepared for this to come out of the blue. “M-My crush? Um... You can tell?”

“I certainly can. Both yours and Iroha’s. I’ve been there myself, you see. I’ve seen the faces of so many friends, infatuated with one boy or another.”

“I-I see... Grown-ups sure are powerful...”

“Tee hee. I wonder if I surprised you, bringing up this topic without warning? I can’t help but be curious, seeing as it concerns my own daughter’s love life too.”

“Oh... Um... I’m sorry...”

“Hm? Whatever for?” Otoha-san cocked her head at me, looking

utterly perplexed.

"I think both Aki and Iroha-chan would be...happier dating each other. I'm just getting in the way of that. So I'm sorry."

"Oh, dear. Has that been worrying you? My, you are so sweet!"

"Eeyah!"

Otoha-san started ruffling my hair like a beloved puppy. Not even my own mom babied me like this. But Otoha-san's palm gave off a motherly warmth that deeply reassured me with every stroke.

Thinking back, I couldn't remember mom taking much care of me at all, even when I was really young. She was always too busy with her work.

I knew she loved me, of course. She always told me so, and even dad was so doting that sometimes it got unbearable. She just hadn't patted my head much like this, so I had no tolerance to Otoha-san's attack, which perfectly calmed my nerves.

"I don't think you're in the way. Actually, from my adult perspective, I can see Akiteru-kun leaning more towards you."

"Wh— Me?" I blinked in surprise.

"You're his childhood friend. His classmate. His neighbor. And serious guys like him tend to go for the more serious, quieter girls."

"I... I hope so... But if I did end up with Aki, what about Iroha-chan?"

"It would hurt her. But you know, that's why..." Otoha-san took a strand of my hair between her fingers to reveal my ear. She leaned towards it, a bewitching tone to her honeyed whisper. "I want you and Akiteru-kun to get together sooner rather than later."

"Wh-Why?"

"Unrequited love hurts more deeply the longer it goes on for. I want her to see her feelings are a dead end as soon as possible, so that she can move on and find another path. It may seem odd to you, but that's what I want as her mother. Can you understand that?"

"When you put it like that...it does kinda make sense..."

At the same time, her logic seemed just a little warped, leaving me with a tiny, gloomy weight on my chest. A weight I couldn't quite identify.

"You're going to Kyoto for your class trip, aren't you? I bet you're thinking it will be a good opportunity to beat Iroha, seeing as she won't be there."

"Uh, I-I'm not. That's a horrible thing to think..."

"You can be honest with me, sweetie. You'll be getting a lot of free time on the trip too, won't you?"

"Um, yes, that's what I've heard..."

From none other than Sumire-sensei. We had a few choices of routes we could take for our tour, but on the last day, we could go out

and do whatever we wanted, as long as we stayed in a group.

“Since you’ll be in Kyoto anyway, I’d love for you and Akiteru-kun to come and visit our office.”

“Y-Your office...”

“The company I run is called Tenchido. We’re based in Kyoto.”

Tenchido! That was it!

A major games company—probably Japan’s most famous video game company worldwide. It sounded like the perfect place to go visit when we had our free time, as long as we had permission from the company.

“Shall we exchange LIME IDs? This is the phone I use for work. I’ll be working at the head office around that time, so just message me whenever you’d like to show up.”

“Um, yes... I’m looking forward to it.”

I was genuinely curious to see Tenchido’s HQ. Aki too—even if his values clashed with Otoha-san’s, he’d probably be excited to see the head office of one of the world’s leading video game companies.

In any case, we could decide on the day whether we actually wanted to go or not. But there was no harm in just exchanging LIME IDs for the time being, right?

Epilogue 3: Meeting with the CEO

After a period of chaos, Tsukinomori-san called me to have a chat—late at night, at the usual family restaurant, and at our usual table. It was fortunate that the usual waitress wasn't there, though.

Tsukinomori-san sat across from me and looked to be in high spirits. He twiddled his gentlemanly mustache. "Mizuki really caused a stir, but then she came back home, just like that. What a bad little kitty, making me worry like that!" he proclaimed in a loud voice, then he laughed. There were no other customers.

"Sh-She's back, huh? Glad to hear it. Ha ha ha ha ha!" I couldn't manage anything more convincing than a dry laugh. Having to pretend I was totally ignorant of the situation was awkward, but I didn't want to arouse any suspicions by telling him the truth. I also didn't want to be slaughtered by his jealous hand and lose the opportunity to get the Alliance a job at his company.

"Get a loada this! So, Mizuki stopped contacting me because she wanted to make me jealous. She was off sightseeing, dreaming of our reunion, and letting all that love build up inside her! Oh, my honey, you're so sweet and adorable! Don't you agree, Akiteru-kun?"

"Oh, yes. Sweeter than a bag of sugar."

"She totally is! Wah ha ha ha ha!"

He was in a *seriously* good mood. I wonder how he'd react if someone told him the truth right now?

I suppressed those evil thoughts, just about managing to maintain a polite smile. "Um, so are we here to talk about your relationship today?"

"Time is too precious to waste on that! Think about who you're talking to."

"Sorry, but putting on a straight face isn't going to convince me at this point."

It might not have been physically in front of me anymore, but I could still see the goopy look in his eyes and hear the loopy tone in his voice.

It seemed he wasn't serious, though. "Wah ha ha ha! You're such a square, as always!"

I sighed. "Please don't mess with me; I find it hard to know when you're being serious. So, what did you call me here for?"

"I wanted to talk about *Koyagi*, of course."

A switch flicked inside me. I straightened up unconsciously.

“This will be an important talk. It’s about your big decision to temporarily pause updates.”

“Are you going to tell me off? Are you going to tell me that two million downloads isn’t enough for someone trying to get a job with Honeyplace Works—that we need at least three million? Or that if we want to change the pace of updates at all, it should be to get them out quicker?”

“Yes, if you want to increase your downloads, you *need* regular updates.” Tsukinomori-san frowned—but then that frown turned into a grin. “But, I think you made an excellent call.” He leaned forward to pat me on the shoulder.

I let out the breath I’d been holding in. “It’s a relief to hear you say that.”

“I know what it’s like, being a developer. There are only a handful of explanations for a decision like that too. With a team your size, I’m guessing something happened to make you realize how illness or injury can force a teammate to withdraw.”

“That’s exactly it. Sorry, it’s kind of pathetic...”

“Not pathetic at all. It’s just life. A team like yours isn’t really suited to mobile games. I’m sure you know that, right?”

“I do. I know we’d be more suited to making something like a console game. Where we could focus on the satisfaction of making something perfect and complete, something that creates total satisfaction with a single playthrough—in other words, a console game.”

I realized pretty early on how tough it was to manage a mobile game, which required constant updates, with only a small group of creators over the long term.

“Of course, with DLC getting the crazy sales they do, we’re starting to need bigger teams for console games too...but anyway, it’s still way more chill than the pace of creating new content for mobile games.”

If I knew, then why did I ignore the issue, and chose to release *Koyagi* as a mobile game instead? The answer was so simple it was laughable.

“That’s true. But we never had the budget to create the environment we’d need to develop a console game, nor the means to get it sold via official channels.”

“No surprises there. When you’re a teenage developer, your options are pretty much mobile or PC. And the way things are going, it makes more sense to pick mobile these days.”

“Yes, but now I’ve seen the dangers of developing a mobile game with a tiny team. Honestly, I’m thinking we’re starting to reach the

limits of what we can do with *Koyagi*.”

“I get it. So, thinking of giving up?”

“No.” I shook my head.

My decision to take a break was a courageous retreat, taken to stop my teammates from pushing themselves. It was also more than that: it was a retreat meant to make my selfish desire a reality. My desire to showcase my team’s talents to the world, and create a place for them within our society.

But it would be difficult to balance that with reaching three million downloads and releasing regular updates. So I needed a new plan: a way to make *Koyagi* grow without reaching that magic number.

I’d put together several ideas. One of them, I decided, I was going to show Tsukinomori-san now.

“I’m going to use our break to study and gain experience so that next year,” I paused, “we can develop a console game with funding from Honeyplace Works.”

At first, Tsukinomori-san said nothing. And then:

“I never expected you to come up with something so *big*.” His eyes were stretched wide with surprise. But, talented CEO as he was, he quickly regained his composure and wagged a finger at me, complete with clicking tongue. “I’m not soft enough to invest in my nephew’s project just because we’re family, y’hear? If you bring me something that’s not worth it—that’s not gonna sell—I’m cutting it down there and then. And if it’s investment you’re looking for, you need to realize you’ll be fighting on the front line, same as professional game developers. Are you ready for that?”

“Yes, sir. I never expected you to go easy on me.”

Tsukinomori-san laughed again, his shoulders shaking, as though I’d just told a particularly amusing joke.

“You’re an entertaining young man indeed, you know that? I thought you were throwing in the towel, but here you are taking the first step to push yourselves forward. Man, I can’t wait to see what your future holds.”

“I should also mention that I plan to enjoy myself like a normal teen till the end of the class trip.”

Our serious discussion was over. Sensing that, I decided to move on to lighter topics.

“You are, huh? Never expected a workaholic like you to say something like that.”

“I’ve been going full pelt for too long. I want to settle down for a bit and expose myself to some new experiences. And before you get any funny ideas, I don’t mean anything the rest of my cohort would be after by ‘experiences.’”

“Ha ha ha, oh, Akiteru-kun! You make me sound like some kind of green-eyed monster who has it in for all these young normies making the best of their teenage years. How rude!”

I’d never heard anyone come out with anything less convincing.

“But yes, the class trip... About that. Can I make a request, Akiteru-kun?”

“You want me to bring you back something? That’s no problem. I’ll get you some special Kyoto snacks or whatever you’re after.” No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I realized something was off, and I cocked my head.

This man was CEO of Honeyplace Works. Would he really be that desperate for confectionery from Kyoto? He probably went to the Kansai region on business all the time, not to mention further afield. He should have access to all the regional snacks he could get his hands on.

Tsukinomori-san leaned forward, putting his hands together like the leader of an organization tasked with protecting humanity from giant life-forms. His voice was grave as he said, “I need you to kill any sleazy teenage scumbags taking advantage of the class trip to go after Mashiro. Got it?”

“I swear you lose a few brain cells every time you start talking about Mashiro.”

Jeez.

Anyway, the class trip was the week after next. There was no work to be done on *Koyagi*, so I might as well enjoy it like any other guy my age.

I hadn’t fit in with the brats in elementary school, so I didn’t enjoy the class trip then. In junior high school, there had been too much other stuff on my mind. Thinking about it, this was the first year I had the chance to enjoy a class trip with real friends.

Ozu, Mashiro, Sumire, Otoi-san, Midori, and the drama club. And lately, though I was as invisible in the classroom as ever, a handful of my classmates had actually started to notice me, thanks to Mashiro.

If there was one source of concern about the whole thing, it was this:

My friend’s little sister would not be there.

Afterword

Good day to my readers across the land! Thank you for your continued support of *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me*, or, *ImoUza*. This is author mikawaghost. If you've got a copy of the Japanese release, did you happen to read the obi on this volume? You did, right? Did you catch what it said?

That's right! *ImoUza is getting an anime!*

It's the moment the whole world, the whole of humanity, and senpais everywhere have been waiting for! Thank you, thank you. Sorry, I should probably fix up my earlier introduction: This is author mikawaghost, whose work, that is slated for an anime, is getting an anime! It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance!

...

Sorry, I kinda got carried away there. I always thought that, writing a book like this, I had a duty to be all smug and annoying, so I tried it out just then. Forgive me?

I know it might seem unconvincing after letting myself get carried away like that, but it's time to move on to the acknowledgments.

Thank you, Tomari-sensei, for your consistently amazing illustrations. The way I see it, it's thanks to your work that Iroha and the other characters are loved by so many fans, and that this series managed to get an anime adaptation. I'm looking forward to your work on the rest of the series!

To mangaka, Hiraoka Hira-sensei: I always enjoy reading the chapters of the *ImoUza* manga. As a reader, it never fails to bring a warm smile to my face, seeing Iroha and everyone so alive and donning all sorts of expressions in your work. I'd love for us to keep working together to make the world of *ImoUza* ever more exciting!

To my editor, Nuru-san, and the editorial department and everyone else at GA Bunko, you're always working to support me, and my gratitude knows no bounds. Thank you so much. Oh, and once work on the anime starts and I get busier, you'll be a little more lenient with me about my deadlines, right?

Now, to all of my supportive readers. It's thanks to your acceptance of Iroha's constant teasing and your continued support that the series has come this far. I'd love it if you could keep cheering me on, until the day we see a bright, cheerful, and annoying group of characters on our screens.

That's all from me,
mikawaghost

...It sure is easy to fill up the afterword when you've got good news to share. It'd be nice if they confirmed a new anime every volume so I could write about it here.

My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!

vol. **7**

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari



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My
Friend's
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My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 7

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by mikawaghost

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